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USA farmworkers

Undocumented Farmworkers Are Refusing COVID Tests for Fear of Losing Their Jobs

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The figures are stark. The number of COVID-19 cases tripled in Lanier County, Ga., after one day of testing farmworkers. All 200 workers on a single farm in Evensville, Tenn., tested positive. [2] Yakima County, Wash., the site of recent farmworker strikes at apple-packing facilities, now boasts the highest per capita infection rate on the West Coast. [3] Among migrant workers in Immokalee, Fla. — who just finished picking tomatoes and are on their way north to harvest other crops — 1,000 people are infected. [4]

The growing numbers reflect the lack of safety guidelines for workers who labor shoulder to shoulder in the fields, travel side by side in vans, and sleep by the dozens in bunks and barracks. On June 2, the CDC and OSHA announced recommendations to help protect agricultural workers, following in the footsteps of Washington, Oregon and California. [5] But there is still no nationally coordinated, mandatory response or tracking of the disease among farmworkers.

The spike in cases is, in part, a result of increased testing. But that points to a new danger emerging that could make outbreaks even harder to contain: Some farmworkers are refusing to be tested for COVID-19.

Eva Galvez is a physician at the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, a clinic that serves 52,000 mostly Latino patients in the agricultural regions that cradle Portland, Ore. When the clinic discovered in April that Latinos were testing positive for COVID-19 at twenty times the rate of other patients, Galvez pinpointed farmworker communities as one of the hotspots. So she worked with the Oregon Law Center to secure statewide hygiene and social distancing rules. (The [rules](#) are set to expire October 24.) Provisions include enhancing safety in employer-provided housing, which *In These Times* has found is fueling outbreaks among farmworkers nationwide. [6]

But Galvez has other worries now. "Although our clinic has plenty of capacity to test, many people won't want to be tested," she says. "Because if they're positive they can't go to work."

"The virus is a scarlet letter," says Reyna Lopez, executive director of Pineros y Campesinos Unidos de Noroeste (PCUN). The 7,000-member farmworker union is based in Marion County, Ore., which ranks third in the state for coronavirus cases per capita. [7]

"Not only is there no paid leave [if you can't work], but no job," Lopez says. "That tells farmworkers they don't have an incentive to tell people that they are feeling sick. The biggest fear is not necessarily the virus itself; it's [not] being able to provide for family."

It is an undeniable crisis. But America is reaping what it has sown. Decades of anti-immigrant policies will make the coronavirus extraordinarily difficult to contain for a vulnerable population which has been forced deep in the shadows.

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As workers in an industry with few unions, a lack of basic worker protections, and a workforce that is estimated to be at least 48% undocumented immigrants, farmworkers have many reasons to fear losing their jobs. [8] Most lack health insurance, sick leave, unemployment insurance, and legal status, and they support extended families here and abroad on poverty wages. Testing and social distancing guidelines may help prevent illness, but cannot prevent job loss. Personal protection is no substitute for social protections.

Trump administration policies have exacerbated the situation. Irene de Barraicua of *Li?deres Campesinas*, a California-based farmworker organization for women, says some farmworkers are not seeking health care because of the “public charge” rule that threatens to deny green cards to those who rely on public services. [9] H2A workers, who comprise over a quarter million workers whose temporary visas are tied to their employers, could be deported if they lose their jobs. Even the “essential worker” letters that some farmers provided to undocumented workers to show ICE in the hope of preventing arrests during the pandemic have backfired, Irene says. [10] Workers interpreted the letter as a sign that raids would increase.

Now the coronavirus has upended agricultural production in ways that further threaten jobs.

The Salinas Valley in California is nicknamed “America’s Salad Bowl” for its 1.4 million acres of farmland that grow everything from artichokes to zucchini. [11] But this year lettuce, strawberries, cauliflower, and spinach are rotting in fields as agribusinesses unable to pivot from institutional to consumer sales cut their losses by cutting workers.

Sinthia, 40, whose last name is being withheld to protect herself, her family and her job, is from Guanajuato, Mexico, and supports two children, her mother, a quadriplegic sister, and a brother who is deaf, mute and blind. Before COVID-19, Sinthia, who is a member of *LÃ-deres Campesinas*, packed boxes of broccoli for up to 62 hours a week in Monterey County. Now her hours have been sliced in half. The restaurants and schools that purchased produce from her employer, PGM Packing, are shuttered due to the coronavirus. [12] “There is no market, no place to sell, no orders,” Sinthia says.

One hundred miles to the southeast, it is the workforce that has been halved at a vineyard in Kern County, where Paola, 30, works. Twenty of 40 workers were fired in order to meet social distancing guidelines. “There is more pressure to get the work done now,” Paola says. A former teacher from Sinaloa, Mexico, Paola says her pay is the same but her expenses have increased. Her two school-aged children eat all their meals at home now and she has to support her recently unemployed parents. Out of fear of infecting them, Paola quit her second, night-shift job at a pistachio packing facility when a co-worker tested positive. “It was worrisome, scary, stressful,” Paola says.

“It’s a very desperate situation. They don’t have food. Many are being laid off,” says de Barraicua . “Farmers are deciding to let their crops rot. They’re also letting the workers rot.”

Farmworkers also fear they could be stigmatized by co-workers and that bosses could fire their entire crew, which often includes family and friends from their hometown.

“We are hearing from advocates that workers would enter ‘death pacts’ where if they become sick they keep it to themselves because the entire camp will shut down,” says Lori Johnson, managing attorney at the farmworker unit of Legal Aid of North Carolina.

Rebeca Velazquez is a former farmworker and an organizer with *Mujeres Luchadores Progresistas*, an organization for women farmworkers based in Woodburn, Ore. One member, she says, was having a coughing fit at work when the owner of the farm walked by and told her to leave. Her supervisor said she needed to get tested for COVID-19. Two days later he told her not to bother: the entire crew of 30 workers had been laid off because of her. Another

Undocumented Farmworkers Are Refusing COVID Tests for Fear of Losing Their Jobs

woman, Rebeca says, was shunned by co-workers upon returning to the workplace after being very ill with COVID-19. She left to work elsewhere and is keeping her illness a secret out of fear of discrimination.

Luis Jimenez, 38, a dairy worker in Avon, New York, says workers are in a bind. They have been told if they get sick and don't say anything they will get fired. But if they do say something they may still lose their job. "The [bosses] don't have a plan if workers get infected," says Luis. "No plan to quarantine, no plan to feed them, no plan to take them to the hospital."

An explosion in cases among vulnerable farmworkers could overwhelm rural healthcare facilities and threaten the national food supply. The thin plastic line now separating workers in the fields is not enough to halt a pandemic or cure a diseased system. Increased protections for workers — including paid sick leave, unemployment compensation, and affordable housing and healthcare — are essential if the spread of COVID-19 is to be curbed.

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Source [In These Times](#).

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[1] Farmworker Justice Update [11/13/19](#).

[2] Bloomberg 29 May 2020 ["Every Single Worker Has Covid at One U.S. Farm on Eve of Harvest"](#).

[3] Reuters, 11 June 2020 ["Coronavirus spreads among fruit and vegetable packers, worrying U.S. officials"](#).

[4] *Politico*, 9 June 2020 ["Coronavirus: In absence of federal action, farm workers' coronavirus cases spike"](#).

[5] U.S. Department of Labor, 2 June 2020 ["U.S. Department of Labor's OSHA and CDC Issue Guidance to Help Agriculture Workers during the Coronavirus Pandemic"](#), *The News Tribune*, updated 11 June 2020 ["Inslee announces additional COVID-19 safety standards for agricultural workers"](#), ["OAR 437-001-0749 Temporary rule addressing the COVID-19 emergency in employer-provided housing, labor-intensive agricultural operations, and agricultural transportation."](#), Office of Governor, 16 April 2020 "Governor Newsom Announces Paid Sick Leave Benefits for Food Sector Workers Impacted by COVID-19, Additional Protections for Consumers".

[6] *In These Times*, 2 June 2020 ["The Food Industry's Next Covid-19 Victims: Migrant Farmworkers"](#).

[7] Oregon Health Authority [Oregon's Covid-19 Testing and Outcomes by County](#).

[8] Farmworker Justice Update [11/13/19](#).

[9] NPA, 24 February 2020 ["Immigrants React As Public Charge Rule Goes Into Effect"](#).

[10] *New York Times*, 2 April 2020 ["Farmworkers, Mostly Undocumented, Become 'Essential' During Pandemic"](#).

Undocumented Farmworkers Are Refusing COVID Tests for Fear of Losing Their Jobs

[11] Monterey Historical Society "[The Salinas Valley: A History of America's Salad Bowl](#)", Vegetable research and Information Center UC "[Salinas-Monterey Area Agriculture](#)", CDFA "[California Agricultural Production Statistics](#)", Blue Book Services, 22 April 2019 "[Building on the Salinas Valley legacy](#)".

[12] US Department of Labor Seasonal Jobs, 24 April 2020 [Farmworker](#).