

Housing as a Social Determinant of Farmworker Health:


New Priorities for Advocacy and Action

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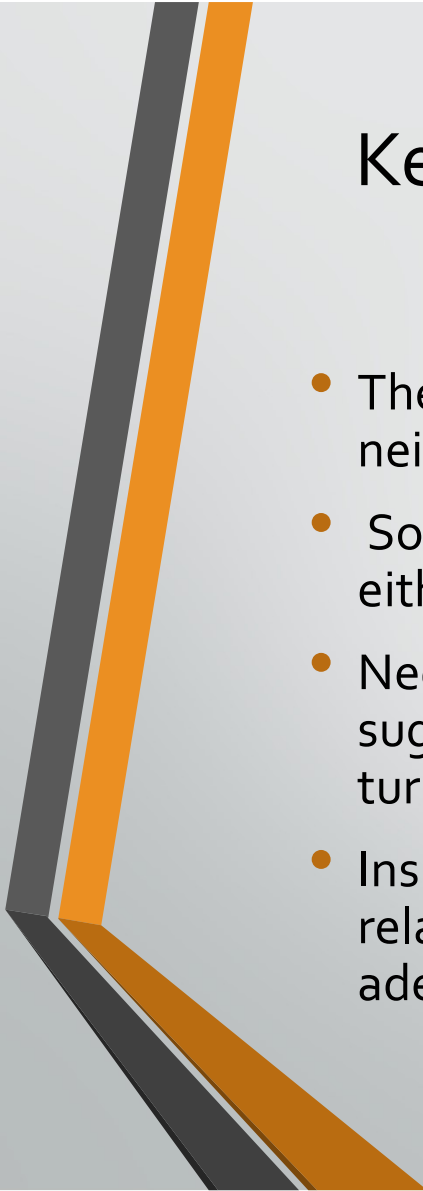
Onward in the 21st Century...

- FW advocates have properly focused on ways in which “the system” oppresses farmworkers
- But advocacy for better wages, workplace conditions, housing quality has not always been linked to health advocacy
- Research over the past decade on the impacts of stress on health and well-being provide valuable insights for advocacy
- ...and confirm farmworkers’ own expressed concerns, validating the idea that a quest for a sense of personal and family well-being is not a luxury



Understanding How Housing Impacts FW Health: A Springboard for Advocacy

- Housing conditions and neighborhood clearly impact FW health in many ways. We now need to build on these insights:
 - For more strategic farmworker advocacy
 - To develop better intervention designs and plug holes in existing service systems
- Mobilizing the research findings for effective advocacy requires:
 - Understanding research insights about how stress contributes to negative health outcomes and thinking how to make things better
 - Focused listening to clients to better understand how interactions among multiple stressors affect farmworkers' lives
 - Looking at how housing and other social universe dynamics interact to give rise to distinctive types of stress




Key insights from research on housing-related social determinants of FW health

- The most serious negative health impacts of crowded housing and neighborhood environment stem from chronic stress
- Social network dynamics and personal interactions within them can have either positive or negative impacts on FW health
- Negative factors in the social environment have cascade effects—suggesting that the most powerful interventions will be those which can turn a “vicious spiral” into a “virtuous spiral”
- Insights from broadly-framed epidemiological analysis (e.g. about the relationship between poverty and health) need to be “unpacked” to adequately understand the complex interactions at play

The Panorama of Stressors in FWs' lives

- The ways in which bad housing interacts with other “domains” of the social universe FWs live in are important. Other major stressors include:
 - **Work environment** —treatment by supervisors, piecemeal pressure, lack of sick leave, seasonal unemployment, chronic underemployment, threat of dismissal due to lack of work authorization, barriers to promotion or changing jobs for the undocumented
 - **Personal/family life management** —Coping with recurring cash flow crises, extended family/social network demands, within-household language barriers, ebb and flow among HH members, trauma of migration, long-term separation from hometown relatives,
 - **Legal context** —with “illegality” being the norm (>50% of FW’s lacking legal status) the “gaze of surveillance” is constant, any new move entails some risk, uneven access to social/public health programs in “mixed status” HH’s, dangers of driving without papers, the paradoxes inherent in dreams of children’s educational future
 - **Societal context** —Rampant anti-immigrant political rhetoric, racism (especially affecting indigenous minorities), burdens of navigating bureaucracies which demand literacy and online access, experiencing the consequences of complaints/standing up for one’s rights



Thinking and Talking About the Social Dynamics that Generate Stress in FWs' lives

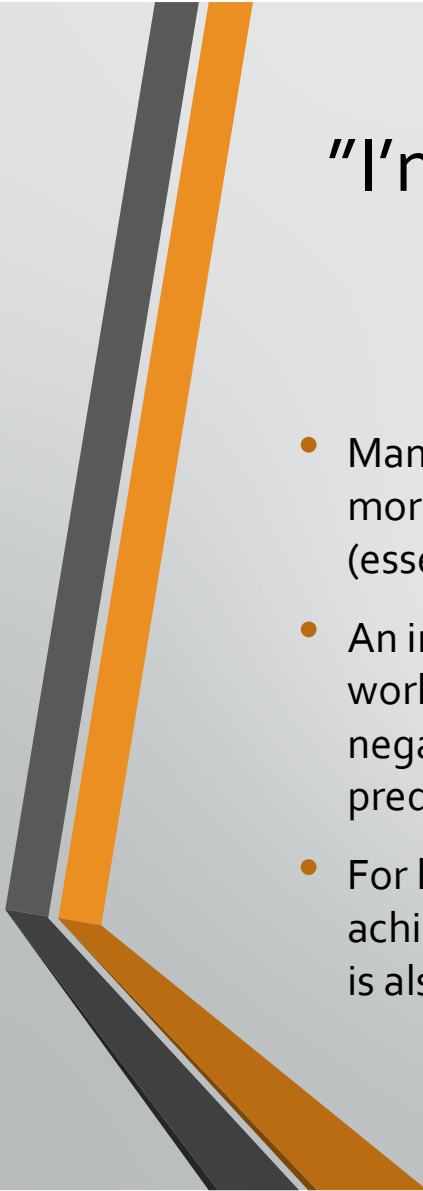
- Stress is real, not an ill-defined, vague “emotional” concept. Stress is measurable and measurably correlated with negative health outcomes.
- Bad housing conditions negatively impact FW health not only through physical risk but, perhaps even more importantly, via psychological/behavioral and physiological responses to stress.
- The stakes are higher than is generally recognized. Stressful social environments have not only immediate negative impacts on farmworkers and their families but, also, long-term multi-generational impacts on FW children.
- Individuals, families, communities are resilient. Stress can be ameliorated and, to some extent, managed. But the challenge is to do this more intentionally and more effectively, in part by harnessing social networks (i.e. the “Cultura cura!” line of thinking”).
- At the same time, program interventions are not enough. Fundamental societal change provides the only solutions for some endemic stress-related problems.

The Negative Physiological Impacts of Stress

- Velasquez-Manoff (2013) highlights “chronic social defeat” as a particularly problematic “flavor” of stress and highlights the research showing that early-life experience of stress lingers on indefinitely. McEwen and other researchers talk about this as “biological embedding” of social status.
- There is widespread agreement that stress heightens chronic levels of cortisol (via the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis) which, in turn, is associated with elevated blood pressure, chronic inflammation, heart disease, arthritis, impaired immune functioning, cancer risk.
- Early-life stress also has lagged impacts on later psychological/behavioral health (e.g. anxiety, emotional control). And the points in development and life when stress occurs also matter (Hertzman and Boyce 2010)
- Geronimus (2015) and her colleagues found that poverty is correlated with shorter telomere length (a stress-mediated indicator of biological aging and correlate of chronic and infectious disease)
- Yet Geronimus’ research also suggests that social networks buffer the impact of poverty by modulating the ways in which poverty is experienced

“The Genetic Ripple Effect of Hardship” Affects Not Just Current FW’s but also their Children

- Stressful early life events and social environment of mothers impact the next generation (Burghy et al., 2012; Gudsruk and Champagne 2012; Skinner 2014)
- Some of these lagged next-generation impacts are behavioral. They appear to stem from epigenetic changes in neurological processing that affect mental and behavioral health
- Other physiological changes are well-documented—e.g. research on how mothers’ malnutrition in WW II affected their children and grand-children’s metabolism --e.g. obesity and diabetes (Mukherjee 2016).
- Huge progress is being made in molecular biology to deepen understanding of the ways in which environment (both psychological and physical) affects epigenetic processes and how they, in turn, affect gene expression and health.



“I’m dancing as fast as I can”: Cognitive and other Consequences of Chaotic environments

- Mani et al. (2013) found that poverty generally constrained cognitive functioning—but, more importantly that stress at harvest time had a direct impact on cognitive functioning (essentially, information overload)
- An implication for FW well-being is that demands in constant juggling efforts to secure work and deal with cash flow, transportation, and other problems contribute to a negative spiral. More problems-→less ability to solve them. Housing costs are predictably a constant stressor.
- For low-SES children, household chaos, “unpredictability” impedes academic achievement and is correlated with emotional distress years later. And calm/quiet space is also needed for academic success

National Agricultural Workers Survey Evidence of Distinctive Stressors Affecting FWs' Mental Health

- Analyses of data from the 2009-2010 NIOSH supplement to NAWS have provided important insights about how some distinctive aspects of FW social and economic life may contribute to depression. Strong correlations:
 - with unauthorized status ($p < .0001$)
 - with being unaccompanied worker ($p < .0001$)
 - with being a seasonal, not a year-round worker ($p < .0001$)
 - with fear of being fired from current farm job ($p < .0001$)
 - with belief respondent would be unable to get a non-farm job within 1 mo. ($p < .0005$)
- I'm not aware that the NAWS data have yet been analyzed to consider how these one-way correlations interact with crowded and/or expensive housing (e.g. >50% of earnings). They should be.



Research on Social Determinants of Health to Better Support Farmworker Advocacy

- Much of the research on stressors and health has been done on urban populations. The stressors in farmworkers' lives are probably experienced differently.
- In particular there is little research on how legal status contributes to overall stress—despite Roberto Gonzalez research on the lives of undocumented youth and young adults, an American Psychological Association task force on psychological impacts, but little on stress and physiology or epigenetic factors
- Advocacy is needed to assure farmworker populations and sub-populations are included in research on stress, epigenetic change, and health.
- Priorities might include:
 - a focus on farmworker women (especially during pregnancy)
 - indigenous farmworkers (cultural context makes a difference)
 - documented vs. unauthorized farmworkers (legal status makes a difference)
 - ways that different configurations of family and village social networks affect stress

Social Capital: the Bright Side and the Dark Side


- Vega and Aguilar-Gaxiola pointed to the “immigrant paradox” in farmworker mental health (which erodes from the 1st to the 2nd generation of immigrant FWs). They, and others, attribute this to the mitigating role of traditional Mexican social networks (brilliantly documented by Larissa Lomnitz in Como Sobreviven los Marginados)
- But Cecilia Menjivar has showed that traditional social networks decay in the cauldron of contemporary economically-stressed U.S. life.
- And my case study research in Parlier in the early 1990’s and, subsequently, in Parlier, CA and Woodburn, OR a decade later, underscored that immigrant farmworkers in dominant village/migration networks had more resources than others
- Social capital is a powerful potential resource for individual, family, and community well-being—but it is constantly threatened and needs to be nurtured.
- These issues are actionable! Strategic advocacy (e.g. re housing design, policing/law enforcement, how work is carried out in the fields, sexual harassment) can make a difference.



Effective Health Advocacy on Social Determinants of Farmworker Health

Farmworker health advocacy needs to:

- Move beyond generalities about the correlation between poverty and health status and explain to doubters that social environment has real scientifically-recognized impacts on health
- Build awareness of stress as a central factor in negative psychological and physiological processes which affect
- Look more holistically at the interplay of multiple social factors—e.g. uncertain availability of work, hierarchical workplace, sub-standard housing, uncertain transportation, unauthorized legal status, limited-English, marginal literacy, cultural hostility, hostile institutions—affect individuals and families' lives
- Appreciate and explain the implications of epigenetic and psychological processes through which current social environment affects not just adult farmworkers but, also, their children. Stress that the stakes are higher than generally recognized, the return on investment for solid interventions higher



Specific Strategies for Advocacy and Change

- Pivot from a primary focus on physically toxic environment (e.g. pesticides, contaminated water) to highlight the real health consequences of a “socially toxic” environment
- Affirm the validity of farmworker families’ concerns about “mental health” (i.e. chronic psychological, physical stress)
- Work hard to design and secure funding for interventions to address chronic stress and the psychological challenges farmworkers face in juggling work and life in a high-pressure workplace and sometimes hostile social environment
- Pivot from “educating” farmworkers by solely emphasizing standard health-related topics toward a focus on practical problem-solving, navigating adversity
- Affirm the validity of social networks’ role in mitigating stress and support maintenance of traditional cultural resources—i.e. the “Cultura Cura!” approach
- Address problems such as workplace stress from sexual harassment as part of labor relations (e.g. the CIW code of conduct)



A summary bibliography of the relevant research literature is available.

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