

Making labor visible in the food movement: Outreach to farmworkers in Michigan

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Abstract

While the food movement includes many critical positive initiatives, it shows little recognition of the labor contributions of the farmworkers who produce the food. A visit to a few local towns in western Michigan revealed farmworkers are invisible in “farm to table” tropes. A study was undertaken to explore farmworkers and their living conditions, and the links between their local invisibility and historic, political, and global processes. Using ethnographic fieldwork, the author visited housing camps, spoke with farmworkers, rode along with outreach workers, and volunteered at migrant summer schools. A framework of structural violence informed the analysis. The findings include descriptions of migrant housing camps, in which migrants face substandard and overcrowded conditions, and their placement in hard to access locations. The study describes how outreach is conducted, highlighting strategies and methods outreach staff/interns use to connect with farmworkers in labor camps, taking information and services directly to them, sensitive to their circumstances, which include limited time availability and communal living conditions. The study also highlights the invisible faciality of farmworkers locally and in international agribusiness restructuring and concludes with a discussion on the role of social work in increasing farmworkers’ visibility in the food movement and practice.

Keywords

Ethnography, migration, violence, outreach, migrant farmworkers, camps

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Introduction

The U.S. food movement began in the early twenty-first century in opposition to the corporate-dominated food industrial system. Its aim is to replace the dominant food system with one that is fair, health-promoting, ecologically sound, and meets the needs of underserved communities (Galt, 2017; Weiler et al., 2016). Initiatives include fair trade, vegetarianism, organic agriculture, urban agriculture, food justice, food sovereignty, food security, farmer's markets, food banks, local food, and community gardens. Alongside the major themes of food justice and access to organic food (Soper, 2020), there is an emphasis on food localism—in fact, thanks to the food movement “locavore” appears in the *New American Oxford Dictionary* (Gray, 2014). But while food movement initiatives have emerged and spread rapidly, the actual workers who pick and pack food are overlooked (Glennie and Alkon, 2018; Gray, 2014; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Wald, 2016a). In fact, the alternative food movement is often criticized for turning its back on local racial and ethnic history and migrant farmworker exploitation (Sbicca, 2015, 2018; Wald, 2016a).

Although my interest in food movements is recent and spurred by manifestations of food-related activism near where I live (See, Hoey and Sponseller, 2018), my encounter with farmworkers came about indirectly during a vacation in 2017 in two popular tourist towns in western Michigan about 150 miles away from where I live. These towns are jointly promoted for sandy beaches, recreation, art, quaint shops, and farm-to-table restaurants. They are located on the shores of Lake Michigan in one of the state's most significant agriculture regions. Studying the plethora of tourist-driven historical narratives and literature promoting the towns and celebrating local agriculture, I saw no mention of farmworkers and did not meet any of them or hear references to their presence. Yet farms in and around both towns supply fruits, berries, and vegetables to retailers well beyond local restaurants, to people across the state and even outside of it, and these farms depend on the seasonal availability of human pickers. Returning in summer 2018, I sought to learn firsthand about farmworkers. I sought to link “local food movements” and “invisible labor” to historic, political, and global processes that shape the experiences and prospects of both those who consume local food and those whose labor brings it forth.

Literature review

Waves of farmworkers have come to the United States from Mexico since 1917, when federal legislation designed to restrict immigration from the Asia-Pacific zone welcomed Mexicans to work in farms in southwestern United States (Lewis et al., 2017). To regulate the unimpeded immigration that followed, the Bracero guest worker program was established in 1942, promising workers many protections (Flores, 2016; Lewis et al., 2017; Newman, 2011). New waves of “braceros” began to arrive. Almost five million Mexicans came under the program, facing

discrimination, program violations, and abuses, drawing the attention of prominent activists like Caesar Chavez (Flores, 2016; Galarza, 1956; Wald, 2016b). In the 1960s and 1970s, labor unions and activists began efforts to unionize agricultural laborers and give them a collective voice (Flores, 2016; Newman, 2011; Wald, 2011).

Over the decades, the farmworker community has changed from within and without. After the Bracero program was terminated in 1964, new waves of laborers arrived under the H-2A guest worker program on temporary non-immigrant work visas. Like the Bracero program the H2-A program has systemic problems. Those who enter the United States on these visas make significant capital investments in their home countries to pay coyotes or labor contractors to obtain visas and make other arrangements for them (Bauer and Stewart, 2013; Holmes, 2013). They enjoy none of the labor protections of permanent residents and their employers and crew leaders can effectively hold them captive, cheat them out of their wages, deny them medical benefits, even for on-the-job injuries, and force them to live in substandard housing (Bauer and Stewart, 2013; Bletzer, 2004; Gray, 2014; Newman, 2011; Summers et al., 2015). Farmworker housing has been studied but the existing research literature is sparse (Summers et al., 2015), and large areas of the country where concerns have been expressed about housing and its relation to health are omitted (Arcury and Mora, 2020; Quandt et al., 2015; Villarejo, 2014). Although non-profit and advocacy agencies provide legal and health assistance to farmworkers, cutbacks to their funding have resulted in limiting the services available outside their offices, especially during peak growing and harvest times when they are pushed to capacity (Connor et al., 2010).

In states such as California, agricultural wealth and fortune has been built on the backs of migrant farmworkers from multiethnic groups (Flores, 2016; Wald, 2016b). But farmworker contributions to the local economy are obscure, forgotten, and often not mentioned by mainstream writers (Flores, 2016; Coronado, 2018). Immigration debates in the popular media do not sensitize people in the United States to the dependence of U.S. agricultural growth and the economy of many rural communities on the low wages paid to Mexicans and other im/migrants (Arcury and Mora, 2020; Gray, 2014; Sbicca, 2015, 2018; Wald, 2016a). The food movement too has neglected migrants' role in food production (Gray, 2014; Minkoff-Zern, 2014). According to Wald (2016b: 64), the alternative food movement, although diverse, has two main ideological wings: a consumer-focused branch and a worker-centered branch. Activism has successfully focussed attention on "conscious consumerism" by humanizing food systems and embracing the independent farmer-citizen, particularly the small-scale farmer (Wald, 2016b: 190). But it has missed the mark and fallen short of drawing attention to our need for migrant farmworkers who produce our food, and the physical and emotional harm they experience in its production. Wald (2011, 2016b) writes that immigration may be among the most invisible facets of the food movement today.

The western region of the state of Michigan has been called a "fruit belt," with many farms, farmworkers, and migrant camps (Larson, 2013). Farmworkers in

this area include H-2A workers, migrant farmworkers who travel from state to state working on different crops as the seasons advance, and farmworkers who after working seasonally for several years have settled out of the migrant stream in Michigan's small towns and rural counties (Coronado, 2018).

Scholarship on farmworkers has recently begun to use the concept of structural violence to link local situations to transnational, political, and historic webs and processes (Benson, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Horton, 2016; Mares, 2019). Structural violence is a cross-disciplinary concept used in social sciences, social medicine, and public health to understand suffering and inequality (Benson, 2008; Farmer, 2004; Holmes, 2013). Besides the physical harm, blame, and resilience of individual actors, structural violence places emphasis on the societal, institutional, and structural dimensions of suffering and violence, such as the role of corporations, markets, and governments in fostering various kinds of harm on populations (Benson, 2008; Farmer, 2004; 2010; Rylko-Bauer and Farmer, 2016). Farmer (2004) provides a useful definition of structural violence: "social arrangements that systematically bring subordinated and disadvantaged groups into harm's way and put them at risk for various forms of suffering" (307-308).

Benson (2008) emphasizes that "faciality" or the face we give to migrant workers is critical to understanding the constitution and perpetuation of structural violence. Scholarly literature on farmworkers repeatedly uses the trope of faceless labor to highlight a lack of awareness of our dependence on the intricate lives of farm laborers (Chavez, 1992; Holmes, 2013; Rothenberg, 1998). Campaigns and initiatives promoting farmworker rights and social justice such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers seek to pull back the veil such that the public becomes more aware (Benson, 2008; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Wald, 2011, 2016b).

While scholars have done research describing farmworkers' history, labor conditions, and their exploitation by growers and crew leaders (Benson, 2008; Galarza, 1956; Gray, 2014; Holmes, 2007, 2013), they have paid limited attention to two areas which the current paper will address. First, scholarship has generally not addressed the types of labor camps and how outreach to them is conducted. Second, studies on farmworkers center mainly on California, Texas, Florida, and North Carolina. These contexts are quite different from Michigan, where the climate creates a limited agricultural employment period. In addressing these two gaps, I use structural violence to extend local findings to the broader context of which they are a part.

Methods

Since my initial knowledge of the community pointed to its invisibility, I embraced an approach requiring visits to locations where I could expect to find farmworkers. I explored methods favoring observation, direct contact, and immersion. Ethnographic fieldwork (Blommaert and Jie, 2010; Holmes, 2013; Horton, 2016) and case study were selected as they proved suitable to answer my research

questions: Who are farmworkers in western Michigan and under what conditions do they live? In what ways are local conditions reflective of broader processes?

I conducted fieldwork during two growing seasons—four months each in summer 2018 and 2019. Alongside outreach staff providing direct services to farmworkers I visited approximately 30 migrant camps, most of them in Allegan and Van Buren counties, in Saugatuck, Fennville, Douglas, Lawrence, Otsego, and Pullman. I participated in outreach visits, observing farmworker living conditions to the extent possible. I conversed with farmworkers informally and recruited 10 participants for semi-structured oral interviews at different sites. Interviews were conducted in Spanish with the assistance of an interpreter and translated to English.

The local towns were new to me and as part of fieldwork I immersed myself in them, interacting with local residents and tourists and visiting shops, galleries, outdoor recreation, and educational and other institutions such as churches and libraries. Since I was interested to know how migrant children spent their days while their parents worked, I volunteered at two local school districts conducting migrant summer school programs, one school each summer. The migrant school programs facilitated participation in community events such as parent-teacher meetings and end-of-summer fiestas.

I networked and also shadowed outreach staff from agencies in the local areas providing limited services to farmworkers at camps. The long-term involvement of some of these staff added layers to the study, during data collection and beyond, enabling it to take off quickly, locate camps, and build trust and credibility with individuals. Finally, following seasonal fieldwork, between fall 2018 and spring 2020, I participated in monthly meetings, trainings, and outreach events of the Michigan Interagency Migrant Services Committee (IMSC), a collaborative of state, federal, and non-profit organizations. Human subjects approval for the study was obtained from the university.

Data gathering included composing extensive field notes capturing observations, encounters, lived experiences, feelings, and reflections. Initial versions of this manuscript were shared with a local resident who had assisted me during outreach visits, compensating for my minimal Spanish language skills and unfamiliarity with the area. He grew up in a migrant farmworker family and his insider perspectives were extremely valuable during analysis and writing of this manuscript.

In the analysis of this study I utilize structural violence as a lens. I draw primarily on Farmer's (2004) use of the term, who followed Johan Galtung (1969). A structural violence framework calls attention to what puts people at risk and sustains inequalities. It helps identify cumulative root causes shaping risk and local reality by addressing historical forces and social, economic, and political processes (Rylko-Bauer and Farmer, 2016: 57).

Findings

This section highlights what I learned about farmworkers, which is mainly about their dwellings and outreach. Although what I learned about the schools migrants'

children attend is not directly included, it intersects in multiple ways with the study. In a sense, I report on the process by which researchers can come to see what is designed to remain unseen or marginalized, and I also highlight some of the difficulties that emerge in this process.

Labor camps

Although “labor camps” or “camps” have become common vocabulary for me when referring to the study, people communicating with me during my fieldwork—friends, students, or colleagues—could not really grasp what they were, even though some of them were frequent visitors to the same local areas. I too initially struggled to arrive at a succinct definition of what camps are and convince others of their existence in the United States. Migrant labor camps are a cluster of trailers or cabins on farms, frequently set up adjacent to work fields. They are accommodations provided by employers for their laborers.

The camps I visited varied in terms of their structure types, number of dwellings, and number of residents. Some had only 2-4 trailers clustered together, but most had between 10 and 20 trailers. A trailer is typically subdivided into individual housing units. Single workers, almost all of whom were men, generally slept in units lined with 4-6 bunkbeds. Families might have their own unit or share with one other. Most units are single rooms, but some are subdivided into a kitchen, living room, and bedroom.

Besides trailers, the other type of structures found at camps are cabins—free-standing structures, single rooms containing bunk beds, an electric stove, a refrigerator, and a sink and tap. Although tiny, these cabins accommodated multiple people, and an entire family or a group of 8-12 single workers can be assigned to a cabin. Camps may also have dormitory-style accommodations—barrack-like structures or farmhouses—with rows of bunk beds. Most camps have only trailers or mixed accommodations of trailers, cabins, and barracks. Few gender-specific toilet and bathing facilities are available for those sharing cabins or in dormitories.

Virtually all the accommodations I visited were substandard, unsanitary, and overcrowded. Their exteriors varied—while I observed a few recently painted, most were weathered and dilapidated. They were poorly insulated and ventilated, with sheets or even cardboard in windows for privacy and to keep out the light or beating sun. Some units had box fans propping windows open and circulating the air during the hot summer days; only a few had window air-conditioning units. The four to six steps leading up to the entry door were frequently unsteady, sometimes made of stacked recycled wood pallets nailed together. In quite a few camps I routinely observed outdoor portable toilets and common laundry rooms, only some of which had dryers.

Camps are regulated at federal and state levels. A few states have adopted stronger regulations than the federal guidelines (Arcury and Quandt, 2020). In Michigan, agricultural labor camps must be licensed and certified. Certificates have to be prominently displayed on a bulletin board or on the front door of each

unit indicating it was inspected and approved. They must state the maximum number of occupants permitted per unit. Not only are housing standards and regulations for farmworkers minimal, but enforcement success varies greatly (Arcury and Quandt, 2020; Joyner et al., 2015). During fieldwork I learned that post-occupancy camp inspections seldom take place unless triggered by a complaint.

Migrant camps are located at a distance from the main road or farm entrance. Because farms have multiple posted signs indicating entry to a farm is prohibited, it is never clear when entering a housing camp if one is trespassing, as they are located within fields and work areas. The right of free access to camps by guests of migrant laborers and representatives of service organizations is upheld in Michigan (Michigan Civil Rights Commission, 2010), although many other states do not permit access (Summers et al., 2015). State law also bars property owners from requiring staff from community agencies to sign in or notify a camp owner/operator when visiting camps. But our experiences visiting camps varied. We were followed on more than one occasion during outreach. Sometimes a crew leader or supervisor hovered nearby in a pickup truck when we spoke to farmworkers, and it seemed obvious that our visit was being monitored. Once a supervisor demanded that I and my companion, an outreach worker, state the purpose of our visit. On another occasion, we had to convince a farm store employee to unlock the gate to the road leading to the housing unit located further back, pointing out that farmworkers' employers cannot prevent them from having visitors. Outreach workers carry "right to access" flyers for these occasions.

Visiting labor camps

It is difficult to capture the diversity that exists regarding camps and outreach events. My first visit to a camp was through an outreach event in the middle of July when I attended a parent-teacher meeting called "Reunion de Padres." It had been planned by the school where I was volunteering. An excerpt of my field notes captures some details of the event:

18th July 2018: I'm driving south on Blue Star Highway to an event called "Reunion de Padres," to begin at 6 pm. I meticulously follow directions I've been given and make a left turn, off the paved road, a quarter mile past the Shell gas station on the southern end of the town. But now I don't see any signs of life. I am uncertain if I'm driving beside a farm or right through it, as besides the rows and rows of blueberry bushes there is nothing else along the unpaved dusty road that appears unused. Did I misunderstand the directions? Am I going to the right place? Suddenly, the road takes a sharp right turn, and I come upon some white tents and realize they had been set up for the event.

I drive past the tents, beyond a few vehicles to park at the far end. I exit my car and take in my surroundings. I am standing adjacent to rows and rows of blueberry bushes. On my right, they extend as far as my eye can see. To my left, there are three trailers where

workers stay. In front of me are three tents: one large tent for parents and others associated with the event arranged with long tables with chairs on either side, and two smaller tents where food preparations are taking place, including a large portable grill where hot dogs are already cooking. Additionally, in a single row 4 white, folding banquet tables, about six feet long, have been set up. These had brochures, books, and trinkets and were manned by staff from Farmworkers Legal, Bethany Children Services, Telamon Workforce and Career Services, etc. A few feet away, between the rows of blueberry bushes, in an opening wide enough for a tractor to drive through, is another portable banquet table. It has all sorts of materials for face painting. As I switch my cellphone to vibrate, I glance at the time: 6:10 pm.

At the event I attended there were about 20 persons who were staff from various organizations as well as a team of volunteers, eight teachers' assistants from the school where I volunteered, and about 30 parents and children. The formal part of the event consisted of a few speeches by staff from the various agencies, an activity wherein parents responded to three questions about their needs, and then a meal comprising of hot dogs, chili, corn, salad, chips, and pop or bottled water. The event was about two and half hours in total.

The "Reunion de Padres" had been promoted to parents with full-color flyers in children's backpacks, and the school informed the farm owner of the date and time of the event. I participated in other school-related outreach events which were organized in a similar way. One of the school districts led these events once a week, with the assistance of a dedicated team of staff and youth volunteers. I did not get access to the full schedule of parent outreach events in 2018, but in the summer 2019 I saw a schedule of nine events that were planned for July and August. However, after the third outreach event, IMSC suggested suspending events for the rest of the season since gathering farmworker families together might put them at risk because U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was known to be active in the area.

There were also some health outreach clinics with a mobile medical van accompanied by a doctor, nurse, and front office receptionist. At some bigger camps, the mobile van also included a larger group of health professionals including community health workers and medical student interns. Another kind of outreach took place through camp visits that were informal and conducted by staff and interns from a variety of agencies and I was able to come along on several. As well, a group of four Latina nuns invited to the area for the summer conducted outreach to camps on behalf of the diocese of Kalamazoo.

Outreach strategies and staff as brokers of information and services

When conducting outreach to farmworkers, timing is critical and the outreach workers I accompanied would generally begin between 6:30 and 7:00 pm. It was interesting to observe a transformation of the camp as workers returned from the fields and began to hustle to attend to chores such as cooking, bathing, and

laundry. While parents immediately tended to their children, single men, or “solos” as groups of laborers without accompanying family were often referred to, hastened to call home on their cellphones. Others, mostly men, gathered in groups around picnic tables playing cards, chatting, drinking a beer—perhaps to relax, pass time, or forget pain and problems. It could also be at this time of the day the interior of their dwellings had soaked in the heat and it was more humid and sultrier than the outside. Sometimes workers might come from a neighboring camp, to celebrate birthdays or participate in religious services organized at camps during the same precious evening hours.

The outreach workers I shadowed conversed with workers who were outside. We also knocked on doors; if someone answered, we spoke with them briefly and offered informational brochures or handouts. This door knocking gave me glimpses of sparse furniture and well-used stoves, fridges, and cookware. On a few occasions, I heard farmworkers describe us to one another as Jehovah’s Witnesses. Unless invited, we never entered workers’ living space, and even then, never stayed very long.

In the evenings, employers sometimes offered workers limited transport to the local store. This occurred in the same vans used to ferry workers from the camp to sections of the farm each day. However, interviewees, particularly H-2A workers, often stated that transportation for needed purchases was a major challenge. Most camps are far from any store such as mini-marts and convenience stores in the small towns of the region and very far from supermarkets and discount stores like Walmart.

Outreach workers taught me the importance of developing a keen sense of observance during visits for everything. Over time, by observing a trailer or cabin from the outside, I learned to identify signals of whether its occupants might be a group of single workers or a family, from footwear on doorsteps or possessions visible on bunk beds from the outside. I also learned that since encounters are brief, one needs to vary communication styles with individuals and groups to convey the most essential information quickly, yet build rapport so individuals feel comfortable enough to return or contact staff later should they require additional information or specific assistance. Additionally, outreach workers must be cognizant of all the persons they might likely encounter at camps in terms of the roles they play. I learned to spot and distinguish supervisors from crew leaders/labor contractors. Labor contractors recruit, transport, house, supervise, and pay workers. They sometimes supply workers to multiple farms and in such cases they have crew leaders on individual sites assisting them. Crew leaders and labor contractors are directly involved with workers and speak fluent Spanish, which supervisors and other farm staff generally did not. During interviews, I heard of the degrading treatment and abuses of power from labor contractors and crew leaders. When labor contractors were around, we observed that workers, particularly H-2A workers, were guarded and reticent to interact with us.

Even though the evening time was limited, farmworkers received outreach staff politely. H-2A workers particularly seemed to appreciate an encounter with people

from the outside world. Being away from family, friends, and their hometowns appeared to make them lonely and isolated and so they seemed happy just to engage in brief exchanges if they were alone and had any time to spare. Some workers wouldn't return until 8:30, yet the camps started to quiet around 9:00. By 10:00 pm most lights would be turned off and a silence would descend all over—not even conversations on cell phones or gatherings outside trailers could be seen or heard.

Most of the staff I shadowed were from an agency whose outreach strategy was to offer a bilingual calendar that included valuable information about various agencies and their resources. Each month's page had information about regulations governing immigration, employment rights, wages, taxes, healthcare, pesticides, and other matters pertinent to farmworkers and migrants. The material seemed to work well as an icebreaker. The conversation that followed was focused and based on the workers' interests and queries. Outreach staff are knowledgeable about resources for public health, day care, education, legal assistance, and religious services. Most of the farmworkers I met know little about the area and laws, regulations, or services available to them in Michigan, so the information was highly valuable. Outreach staff and interns also sometimes acted as intermediaries, for example by bringing legal documents by which workers could engage attorneys to take action to protect their employment, health, and safety rights. Also, professionals such as attorneys do not have the flexibility to work around the availability and locations of farmworkers. Thus, outreach staff/interns act as brokers for an array of valuable information. Many of the volunteers and staff who performed this service were themselves raised in farmworking families and their cultural competence and language skills were invaluable, as I observed.

The meticulousness of outreach

During fieldwork, I accompanied staff/interns of three different agencies on a fairly regular basis. Outreach workers made me conscious that although outreach is informal, there are many nuances and a meticulousness to how it is conducted. Furthermore, they taught me that everything that happens on a visit—conversations, observations, tasks, and notes—has a purpose and should not be construed as mundane. My field notes included several illustrations. For example, one evening, I had the opportunity to visit some camps that I'd never been to before with two interns I had never met before. Shadowing them, I composed the following:

I am seated in the back of an older model Sonata. To my left are two cardboard boxes with calendars and promotional materials, organized neatly in separate piles. Two interns occupy the front seats. It is clear they have planned this trip carefully as they have water, sunscreen, an itinerary, addresses, maps, etc. Both are fluent in Spanish although it is not their native language.

I listen carefully and scribble a few details about outreach at this agency: generally once a week; 4-6 camps on each trip; interns are not expected to begin outreach until they

have spent about 2-3 weeks at the agency, by which time they have learned about laws and regulations affecting farmworkers; completion of a three-day intensive training prior to beginning outreach; always go in pairs; and the agency uniform must be worn and identity badges prominently displayed for all visits. We have now turned off the main road, made two quick left turns, and parked parallel to a white pickup truck—the only vehicle at the camp. As we disembark, the driver concludes, “Actually interns benefit more from outreach than the agency itself.”

[At the end of the evening I wrote]

This evening we have visited six camps. Locating them has not been easy. It has been advantageous riding in the back—I can ask questions and take copious notes, somewhat inconspicuously. I am impressed by how my hosts have conducted themselves throughout the evening. I point out their meticulousness. They ask about crops picked, how long persons have been at the camp, and gather details of the various dates when particular groups/individuals have arrived to work in the fields, as H-2A workers in particular often arrive in batches as specified on job orders submitted by labor contractors or growers. As we walk through the camps, if there are vehicles, they observe their types and gather information about license plates and the states indicated on them, to ascertain where the vehicle owners might be from. If there's a transport van they note the state to which is registered.

I mention other things I've seen them do such as, they do not make notes in the presence of workers, but immediately after leaving a camp one drives and the other makes detailed notes about everything. In the vehicle, they discuss and compare observations/notes to notes from previous visits, which gives them a sense of what has changed during the season and how what they observed compares to previous seasons. In response to my observations outlining their diligence and meticulousness a smile emerges on one of them expressing surprise that I was able to take in so much. They mention they were nervous when they first started doing outreach and that they initially found it difficult to engage with workers, decide how to handle interactions in the presence of a crew leader, and retain important details to compose outreach memos for the agency about each visit but that it had gotten easier over time.

To outreach staff, farmworkers are visible. But most staff I encountered were seasonal hires or summer interns. It was only at semi-organized outreach events that I met regular staff from government and non-profit agencies who staffed tables of information for farmworkers about their services. Outreach workers who had worked for multiple seasons knew farmworkers and their families in a much more personal way than newer staff and interns. Learning about outreach from such stellar staff/interns led me to grow comfortable with outreach over time, and I found I got better at connecting with farmworkers and their families.

As I became familiar and comfortable with outreach, I was able to spot some differences among workers. The vulnerabilities and compliance of H-2A workers

became increasingly clear to me. In the presence of other workers, they spoke positively of their employment and housing. During interviews they mentioned poor working conditions, wage theft, health and security violations, and stresses from cramped housing including finding it difficult to sleep at night. Guest workers are younger, and I noticed that when they have just arrived, they might play soccer in the evenings. On outreach visits later in the season, I never noticed anyone playing soccer. Everyone looked much more tired in the evenings. I even noticed changes in gait as I watched some of them shakily ascend the few steps to enter their trailers.

Sometimes when we arrived at a camp, workers might already be home if the crops had been sprayed with potent pesticides and thus, they were obliged to take the entire day off. Other days they were home when it had rained, and fruit might be too tender to be picked. A day off means lost wages as workers are paid hourly. The precarity of the workers was particularly clear towards the end of August in 2018, as there wasn't enough work available and groups of workers had left the camps. Those who stayed worked even longer hours and outreach staff could not even meet them. The forthcoming apple crops which might have provided future work were less abundant this particular year. Farmworkers are poorly paid, physically exhausted, and have no assurance of consistent employment.

Local immersion

To immerse myself in these towns I stayed at a popular recreational campground and visited recommended hip local food restaurants, arts establishments, and farms inviting visitors to pick their own fruits. Even as an outsider I could observe some social boundaries and the persistent invisibility (Nelson, 2008) of migrant farmworkers. Although staff and/or volunteers welcomed outsiders and invited us to partake of the local history, businesses, and attractions, they never mentioned farmworkers and how they were integral to the local farms. Furthermore, I never observed any Latinxs employed at these venues, although there's been a demographic shift and many Latinx families who initially came as migrant farmworkers live in the area year-round (Coronado, 2018; Valdés, 1991). Farmworkers were never depicted in promotional literature, billboards, and the works of local artists displayed for sale at many local art shops.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand farmworkers in western Michigan and the conditions in which they live. Through fieldwork I was able to learn about camps and see how workers and camps were invisible in the local area except to outreach workers. I learned about outreach and its value in the context of the unique circumstances of farmworkers. I was also able to see the background factors creating structural violence.

Camps

All of the farmworkers' housing units I visited were substandard, cramped, and offered no privacy. Although access to camps is still restricted in many states (Summers et al., 2015) but permitted in Michigan (Michigan Civil Rights Commission, 2010), outreach staff/interns sometimes had to tread cautiously when entering them. While my findings about the conditions at camps are not new (Arcury and Mora, 2020; Quandt et al., 2015; Summers et al., 2015), housing (in)visibility and its links to structural violence receive little emphasis in the literature. According to Farmer (1992), structural violence is perpetuated through invisibility. He encourages scholars to open new fields of vision by bringing into focus historical and societal forces, attendant inequalities, and responses to phenomena/observations. Holmes (2013) has taken up the call and expanded ethnographic descriptions to include the multiple structural factors that perpetuate the exploitation of indigenous laborers.

This study highlights how the following factors come together to create structural violence: location of camps, inspections, and crew leaders. In general, the public does not observe farmworker housing due to how it is placed, such as at a distance from the paved road or hidden behind farm buildings. Consequently, people I met thought they are like recreational campgrounds. Federal standards for labor camps were established decades ago and they contain many regulations that no longer reflect current housing trends (Joyner et al., 2015). As a result, some states have adopted stricter standards than at the federal level which gives rise to conflicting regulations. Furthermore, there is limited enforcement of housing regulations (Arcury and Quandt, 2020; Joyner et al., 2015). Government neglect and noncompliance arise because camps house people belonging to a marginalized social class (Benson, 2008; Villarejo, 2014). Workers are unlikely to report violations due to language, lack of familiarity with the law, and fear of losing jobs or deportation.

The crew leader system has been around since the postwar period in the 1950s, when the intensification of farm mechanization and market globalization gave rise to a need for a steady supply of flexible and inexpensive labor (Benson, 2008). This need for labor opened a niche which had to be filled; some Mexican American farmworkers migrated to Florida, establishing themselves as labor contractors. Contractors have access to labor from remote places of origin and new ethnic groups, including indigenous workers (Mines, 2013) and exploit the abundant availability of labor. Although legislation requires labor contractors to register with the Department of Labor, in practice it is hard to regulate this group and report their noncompliance. According to Benson (2008), crew leaders are the most dangerous part of the labor system. I observed how intimidating their presence can be and how they make sure that workers, particularly guest workers who are here on temporary status, remain submissive and indebted to them. Crew leaders and labor contractors act as intermediaries for recruitment, transportation, living arrangements, remuneration, and communication. Farmers or growers contract

directly with crew leaders to obtain a steady labor force. Duties and responsibilities between these two groups are blurred, and workers are caught in the middle.

Outreach and outreach workers

Outreach is not only an important event and activity by itself, but I consider it the most valuable service rendered to farmworkers in the context in which they live and work with little time at their disposal. This study mentions different types of outreach, describing two of them—semi-organized events and informal outreach conducted by pairs of workers or interns. The findings of this study highlight that although outreach is informal, it is conducted in a deliberate and meticulous manner with attention to worker work schedules and limited free time, and with respect for communal quarters. Outreach is provided in person and on site.

Outreach workers contribute expertise from multiple angles—not only do they know the locations, circumstances, and barriers faced by laborers, but they also know resources in the community and refer farmworkers to them. Outreach offers limited checks and balances to help prevent abuses and violations of workers' rights, as outreach staff visit camps more frequently than any government inspectors. But they play a delicate role as they must weigh whether reporting abuses will undermine the safety and continuity of employment of individual farmworkers as labor contractors and/or growers may retaliate. Furthermore, the trust carefully cultivated with workers may be lost. Frontline outreach is important as it augments agency services, yet frequent turnaround among outreach workers impacts the continuity of such a valuable service. Outreach staff are hired seasonally, receive limited hours after the season, and in some agencies outreach duties are left to be performed by seasonal hires or students/interns. A greater value should be placed on the role outreach staff play in serving farmworkers.

During outreach, we encountered a diverse group of farmworkers. Research suggests that farmworker migration status profiles have changed; most no longer migrate in the transnational sense, and they return to their home countries infrequently if at all (Gray, 2014; Meierotto et al., 2020; US Department of Agriculture, NAWS, 2018). While this shift has taken place to a large extent due to border security policies (Hamilton and Hale, 2016), and recent changes to Migrant Protection Protocols implemented by the Department of Homeland Security, it does not align with my observations of migrant farmworkers in this study. I met many migrant farmworkers who still travel annually from state to state making Michigan their temporary home for the season, H-2A workers who travel transnationally, and some who crossed the Mexican border under perilous circumstances. This contradictory finding may be because Michigan's climate makes farm work very seasonal. Some long-term outreach workers and staff who were former outreach workers indicated that they observed an increase in numbers of H-2A workers.

The H-2A program has a complicated design, since the federal Departments of Labor, Homeland Security, State, and Justice all oversee it. A limited sharing of

information and a lack of communication among departments can lead to failure to report abuses at all levels, including a lack of sanctions for bad employers and corrupt third-party recruiters in the United States and abroad (Coronado and Martinez, 2019). My experience of H-2A workers in the study constantly reminded me of similar areas outlined decades earlier by Ernesto Galarza (1956) requiring improvements to the Bracero Program—housing, transportation, braceros' anonymity in camps, and their transnational commodification as capital (see also, Wald, 2016b). Outreach workers directly witness the conditions and struggles of H-2A workers in terms of social isolation, fear, vulnerability, and exploitation. They do their best not only to support individual workers and report abuses, but to advocate for change to policies detrimental to farmworkers. For example, since the COVID-19 outbreak outreach staff through advocacy organizations are calling on Michigan's state government to regularly inspect housing, space out beds, and establish quarantine guidelines should farmworkers get sick. To this end, an Executive Order was signed on 1 June 2020 offering protections to agricultural workers living in congregate housing (Executive Order No. 111, 2020).

Broader factors influencing structural violence

Benson (2008) employs the term “faciality” when describing the face of inferiority growers and supervisors give to migrant workers which then becomes the justification for everyday violence. Migrant workers because they are considered racially subordinate are expected to endure living conditions that their employers would themselves find abhorrent (Sbicca, 2018). Farmworkers are facialized to be seen as laborers who are threatening, from outside the local area, morally inferior, and filthy (Benson, 2008; Gamlin, 2016). My own study suggests that farmworkers are simply invisible to residents and wealthy tourists in the areas I visited. Such invisibility can also legitimize structural violence. The tourist and promotional literature of the local areas I visited highlights agriculture through pictures of luscious and ripe fruits and vegetables arranged in bunches or neatly packed in boxes, long symmetrically planted rows of blueberry bushes, and signboards with words like “farm to table” or “shop, buy, eat local.” Not including farmworkers in these pastoral images erases their labor and suffering required to harvest the fruits and berries and maintain the landscape. There were white racial images included in the promotional literature, as well as landscapes of sand dunes, beaches, and the blue waters of Lake Michigan, but farmworkers and Latinx people were excluded. Thus, there emerged a certain racialized mapping of belongingness and exclusion.

But macro forces of liberalization driving transnational labor migration and the role of government also create structural violence (Benson, 2008, Holmes, 2013). Among the more macro interlocking factors causing and maintaining the structural violence impacting farms and farm workers are the power of agricultural corporations, downward economic pressure on agricultural production, systemic government neglect, guest worker programs designed primarily to benefit growers, and laws concerning employment, housing, and other facets of farm work.

Growers are not the simple cause of structural violence. They also endure hardships and challenges as a result of pressures exerted on them by large farming companies and international agricultural/food corporations (Benson, 2008; Gray, 2014; Holmes, 2013). Today, they are no longer independent growers. As a result of international competition, intensified company demands, annual contracts forcing them to comply to maintain themselves, accompanied by government neglect, they become a vector of harm when networked in globalized systems of production and consumption. If the government and by extension its enforcement agencies, border control agents and ICE agents, have the law on their side in terms of restricting the movement of farmworkers outside the farm, inside the farm the laws protect the grower (Benson, 2008; Holmes, 2013). Growers and housing providers prominently displaying housing certificates as seals of approval make it additionally impossible for workers to complain about violations. In yet another instance the growers have the law on their side, and they see migrants as deserving less (Benson, 2008; Holmes, 2013). This becomes another side of faciality, a strategic way of coping, a way for growers to save face by deflecting their role in the suffering of workers to governments and corporations that make farm business less stable and adversely impact living and working conditions of farmworkers. Along similar lines, growers by hiring labor contractors strategically distance themselves from illegal yet financially beneficial hiring practices and noncompliance with labor camp housing standards, routing blame onto (Mexican) labor contractors, who are differentiated as Others (Benson, 2008).

Implications and a role for social work

The findings from this study provide some avenues for service and advocacy for migrant farmworkers, a vulnerable population. Practical implications call for advocacy to make the living and working conditions of farmworkers visible through public policy changes, professional/social work advocacy, and public educational initiatives. Making labor and its contributions visible in the food movement makes faciality matter on the most basic levels of public policy. Public policy debates and measures can challenge or reproduce how bodies, faces, and spaces are facialized and spatialized as alterity (Benson, 2008: 618). There is need for greater awareness of how our economy and local areas are dependent on farmworker contributions and consequently we need to extend welcoming documentation and provide better conditions for them. Disciplines like social work are in need of robust analytic theories to highlight social problems. The framework of structural analysis is not only robust, but also incorporates social justice principles without requiring a separate concept (Rylko-Bauer and Farmer, 2016). Social workers are trained in biopsychosocial models. Since they work in diverse settings such as hospitals, prisons, government agencies, and community agencies, it is important for them to understand the social context of farmworkers, so they can bring this perspective to interdisciplinary teams as migrants and families

with mixed status come to these settings as clients seeking services. Social work education should emphasize the salience of outreach, fieldwork, networking with staff, and learning Spanish to access invisible populations such as farmworkers. Along these lines, public education should highlight the value of outreach to vulnerable populations, and the need to create more full-time outreach positions.

Conclusion and study limitations

The growth of agricultural output and food surpluses over the last 70 years has been built on structural violence that puts farmworkers in harm's way, while international agricultural restructuring, government neglect, and even local historical narratives and the directions the food movement has taken collude to create a context in which farmworkers and their contributions remain invisible and they themselves remain without adequate social responses. Even the recent COVID-19 crisis refers only indirectly to them as essential in that we are unable to grow and harvest our food without their services; yet the government, agribusinesses, and growers are less willing and inadequately prepared to provide them access to similar services offered to other workers deemed essential, including social distancing, testing, personal protective equipment, health services, paid sick leave, and public recognition. In many ways, once again their labor is desired by the nation while they remain faceless, invisible, and less deserving.

There are a number of limitations to this study. Western Michigan is a large "fruit belt" with many farms, farmworkers, and camps (Larson, 2013); I was only able to visit and study a few camps. I did not directly study farmworkers' working conditions. I also could not gather the point of view of growers and what they thought about things beyond them, or in their frame of control, such as camps, farmworkers, and even labor contractors. Furthermore, many aspects of what farmworkers thought about their own situation are not included as it would require language familiarity and a longer time investment. The concept of structural violence itself comes with pitfalls due to overgeneralization of culpability (Benson, 2008). The efforts of the analysis in this study to locate growers and farmworkers as part of a shared predicament do not neglect the division of labor that clearly exists on farms (Holmes, 2013), or let growers off the hook for noncompliance and other abuses, or conclude both are equal vectors of structural violence. However, locating both groups shows complexity in how agribusiness can obscure the field of analysis, but enables the study to underscore there are different structural forces impacting them.

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