Farm Workers: A Case of Injustices

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Abstract

This paper will examine and discuss the injustices that illegal farm workers face. Farm workers are highly impacted by the poor working conditions in agricultural fields. Primarily, this research will analyze the negative effects of harmful chemicals have in the health of workers and their families and how this comes to be a conflict and a dysfunction in society. By applying conflict and function theories this research analyzes why of the conflict between the working class and their employers, and why there is not a balance between this two groups. I expect to create a more conscious understanding about the health risks that agricultural workers and their families face on a regular basis.
Introduction

What is the significance of society knowing about the injustices that undocumented farm workers face today? Illegal farm workers have been and continue to be prejudiced of many injustices through history. Despite the 1970 movement, by César E. Chavez, there has not been a radical change in respect to living and working conditions, wage, and improvements in health care. Immigrant workers remain in the shadows because of their legal status in this country. Many feel that speaking up means they will be deported back to their country of origin. Working conditions are of great concern because they face many health risks, from being highly exposed to pesticides to having back problems from being bent all day picking up strawberries and other products. Yet not only are the workers highly at risk, but so are their families and especially children.

In the essay “In the Strawberry Fields,” by Eric Schlosser, he addresses the working conditions of immigrant workers. Schlosser also addresses the high number of migrant workers working today, as well as being the poorest workers in the United States. Yet, Schlosser does not touch on the health risks that represent working in the fields. I plan to emphasize more on the health risks that are present in the everyday life of a migrant farm working. I will discuss how pesticides have a negative effect on the life of workers, but also to their families. Children of farm workers are at a greater risk of having health risks because of their high exposure to pesticides. Sociological implications that come along with doing this research are or might be the constant demand that [we] consumers make to the agricultural companies, to supply us with fresh fruits and vegetables. This not only has a negative impact in the industry but also to the farm workers. The pressure that consumers places upon the industries makes them produce more and use more harmful chemicals that affect the lives of farm workers but also to those living near
agricultural fields. The amount of pressure that is placed upon the working class creates conflict. In this case the farm workers, the poor, are being oppressed by their employers and by consumers, the elite.

My personal interest is not to gain any recognition, rather I want to create an understanding and educate people about what it represents being an illegal farm worker working in highly pesticide exposed areas. I want to be an advocate for those that do not want to speak up for their rights and for what they believe is right for them and their families, but also to make them understand that because of fear they are affected even more. Moreover, I want to educate those people that do not comprehend the effects of pesticide exposure and object to be educated and in the long run will not only have a positive effect on the farm workers lives but also to the environment and in the lives of society as a whole. Education will contribute to all parts: farm workers, agricultural employers, and consumers, because it will create true functionalism and have a true state of balance in society.

Literature Review

In “In the Strawberry Fields” Eric Schlosser addresses the importance of immigrant labor in California’s agricultural industry. The cultivation of crops has become dependent of the cheap labor that immigrants provide to the industry (Schlosser, 2003). If workers were to demand better wages the agriculture industry will be broke. “The easy way to reduce labor cost is to keep workers off the books. Paying in cash lowers the cost of the workers by at least 20 percent” (Schlosser, 2003). The large numbers of immigrant workers, working in the fields, makes the farmers pay them less than the deserving amount. The strawberry requires workers to be very careful on what berries are right to be picked up, of the appropriate size, and ready to be sold in
the market. Fresh strawberries fluctuate widely, from $4.00 to $22.00 a box, depending on the quality. Despite of the price, sold on the market, workers are still being paid from $7.00 to $8.00 an hour and in some cases they are even paid $4.25 an hour (Schlosser, 2003). Strawberry is an unpredictable crop because it is a delicate and fragile crop that sometimes does not represents many earnings for growers. During harvest season, shacks and apartments are over crowded with workers, which make living conditions one of the worse in agricultural fields. When buying fresh produces at the grocery store, the consumers should think about the situation that workers face in the fields of California. “The free market always seeks for work force that is hungry, desperate, cheap—a work force that is anything but free” (Schlosser, 2003). The market takes advantage of the conditions of undocumented workers in order to obtain cheap labor and to gain the greatest profits.

The inequalities of political and social power are present in the everyday life of a farm worker. The living conditions and the unequal distribution of citizenship and belonging become embedded in long-standing social structure, normalized in institutions, and naturalized in everyday experience (Benson, 2008). The differences the workers are subject to become their norms and social structures because that is what is presented to them. The workers have a sense that is normal to be treated in an unequal way; farm workers have internalized the unequal treatment to their way of living. Farm workers conform to their situation because they fear the “constant threat of deportation” (Benson, 2008). They have to follow the rules even if they are subject to oppression. The conditions that farm workers have live and continue to live in have been hidden from the public eye (Benson, 2008). The conditions in which agricultural workers live are still not depicted as how farm workers live them. Rather, society has constructed a culture of romanticism to portrait the workers working conditions.
The migrant and seasonal agricultural workers in the United States do the job that other Americans do not want to do (Weathers and Garrison, 2004). One of the major causes of this is because migrant workers are still being underpaid for long hours of hard work. Even though agricultural fields are culturally and ethnically diverse, today Hispanics are the dominant ethnic group. Agricultural workers are young, impoverished, mostly males with only 20 percent being females, most being undocumented, 95 percent being born in México, and with little or no education. Sixty-one percent of farm workers and their families still live below the level of poverty, and 45 percent are families with children who are at high risk of health problems (Weathers and Garrison, 2004). Farm workers continue to be oppressed despite of the many efforts made by many organizations; United Farm Workers being one, another concern are children of migrant workers.

Farm workers in the United States, “endure conditions of structural violence, including deplorable wages and endemic poverty, forms of stigma and racism, occupational health and safety hazards, poor health and limited access to services” (Benson, 2008). People sometimes view undocumented farm workers as part of a different culture and seek ways to categorize illegal immigration as a crime and not as something that is beneficial to the nation. Instead of individuals being conscious about the health and working and living conditions, wages, and exposure to harmful chemicals, people turn their focus to the issues that are of less concern, illegal immigration. With the deportation of thousands of undocumented farm workers the agriculture fields of California will be abandoned, because no one will be working for such low wages

Three different problems are present in the lives of farm workers health in California susceptibility to tuberculosis, exposure to agricultural chemicals, and maternal and newborn
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health (Herr H., 1998). In particular tuberculosis is a health risk that is present in farm workers' lives, but due to lack of information and education they know little or nothing about the disease. Farm workers’ working and living conditions are the fundamental cause of specific health illness (Herr H., 1998). Health problems that affect farm workers in alarming rates are tuberculosis. Due to the undermined and lack of health care many agricultural workers do not get the intervention needed. Among virtually all of ten farm workers studied, who were diagnosed and under treated for tuberculosis, it was also noted that there was a lack of information about the disease. Many of the workers expressed that they wanted more information, as well as education to know better about the disease and what they can do to prevent TB transmission to their families, in particular children (Herr H., 1998). Lack of information and education makes farm workers more susceptible to health risks, which in other words have long health effects on human beings.

Exposure to pesticides and other agricultural chemicals is recognized by scientist and health practitioners as a human hazard. Effects of exposure range from short- to long-term, and can be both mild and severe. Federal and, in some cases, state regulations mandate educational programs to reduce workplace pesticide exposure, as well as reporting systems to monitor exposure and its health consequences (Quandt, Arcury, Austin, Cabrera, 2001). The population of farm workers exposed to the hazardous chemicals is mainly composed of Mexican natives as well of natives from Central American countries. The reduction of chemical exposure implies that there has to be a change in behavior. Both the farm workers and the community and society have to be part of the change that will enable the reduction of chemicals in the agricultural fields. Health care personnel believe that pesticide related health problems are under reported and underrated (Quandt, Arcury, Austin, Cabrera, 2001). The lack of transportation plays an important role in farm workers not attending check ups at clinics, many may also resist going for
diagnosis or treatment because they fear of decrements in wages and of losing their jobs. Cultural barriers also contribute to the exposure of pesticides, one of them is the belief that showering after working will contribute to more health problems like that of having back troubles (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009). This contradicts recommendations because in order to prevent further intake of pesticides one should shower immediately, especially if a child is the one at risk.

The seriousness of pesticide used among farming communities is crucial, especially on when children are exposed to harmful chemicals. Children, however, are at greater risk because they have immature body systems, smaller size, and behavioral and developmental patterns are different from those of an adult (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009). Despite the seriousness of the topic, health care providers do not feel adequately prepared to address safety prevention and education regarding pesticide exposure to the agricultural families. Health care providers, however, continue to address the vulnerabilities and risks of children at all stages, in order to provide these families more education about the topic and how to prevent the excessive exposure to pesticides. Children’s lives are characterized by living in poverty, social isolation, and limited protection by government, but they also face barriers when accessing health care. Because of the immigration statuses many families do not receive the proper health care because they cannot to afford the cost of doctors. Children in particular are the most vulnerable. Sometimes the delivery of care to children requires more attention compared to adults. The differential treatment of children working in agriculture, as compared to those performing non-agricultural labor, translates into important health and safety risks for them (Weathers and Garrison, 2004).

Working in agricultural fields means that children are spending long hours in the fields and are
receiving a poor education, working in the fields also means that they are more expose to pesticides.

There are many contributions to the high risks for children being exposed to pesticides, one being that approximately 1.2 billion pounds of commercial agricultural and residential pesticides are used in the United States. In 2008, the EPA reported that 75 percent of households in the United States have used pesticides at least once, 80 percent of pesticides were used inside the home (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009). Yes, pesticides might be important to combat rodents and insects, but its consequences in the human health are brutal. Abdominal pain, skin and eye irritation, changes in heart rate, bronchospams, cancer, and even death are caused by the constant exposure to pesticides. Though in children the risks can be irreversible, causing learning disabilities, decreased memory function, and developmental delays (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009). Children spend more time playing on surfaces where pesticides accumulate and the increase of pesticide intake is higher because children behavior and understanding is not as developed, and also because they take toys and other playing materials to their mouth. At later stages of a child’s life they do not receive the proper information that is needed to prevent pesticide exposure. In areas where there are agricultural fields the risk for children is greater since children play outside, breathe and come into contact with pesticides that are on the air (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009). Not only are children from agricultural workers at risk of pesticide exposure but so are children of non-agricultural workers. Children leaving near agricultural fields have the same risks of being exposed to pesticides because of pesticide drift. Farm workers houses lack the adequate facilities this leads families to leave windows open allowing pesticides to enter the home and accumulating into surfaces, such as furniture, walls, toys, and floors. Pesticides also accumulate in clothes and due to lack of laundry facilities and
storage. Laws and regulations are not clear and are limited to the use of pesticide, but not to the negative effects that pesticides have on workers (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009). Children as young as twelve years start working on the agricultural fields there is no laws that prohibits the employment of children rather the law permits employer to hire them; the hours of children have no limit and they could work as many hours as they want to.

The growth of agriculture over the decades has been built on the structural violence that places farm workers into risks, neglecting them from government protection, and cultural barriers such as stereotyping (Benson, 2008). The agrarian industry has grown through the expense of risking workers’ lives and of placing them into different social structures simply because of their legal status and cultural background. Although farm workers receive some type of training about the risks that it represents being exposed to pesticides, most do not receive the proper training that employers should give them and to some extend they do not receive any training at all. (Quandt, Arcury, Austin, Cabrera, 2001). Training and education are important to inform the farm workers about the risks that they are facing, but those that are providing the information need to be aware that indigenous people are also working in the fields and they need to be culturally sensitive because people’s beliefs differ from one another. Health care providers among other organizations, private and public, should address the topic directly with the agricultural families about their safety and how to prevent pesticide exposure, and where can they get help if they need it, but also to educate the farm workers with information of the risks that pesticides represent. Advocates and health care providers need to intervene, at the local, state, national level, to decrease the exposure to pesticides and to create better living and working conditions for agricultural farm workers. (Frost Lucas, Jackson Allen, 2009) More attention is required, but it is nearly impossible to receive that type of attention because
agricultural families are constantly migrating; it is impossible for caregivers to keep up with the treatment that most children require. Most of these children do not follow up with a doctor and their lives continue to be at risk because of the many health risks that they are exposed to due to the exposure to deadly chemicals (Weathers and Garrison, 2004). Furthermore, with education and information agricultural workers could be more aware of the health related illnesses that they are exposed to. Providing education and self-organizing opportunities to farm workers, training and educational opportunities to health care providers, data collection to policy makes, and through involving the public to be more conscience about farm workers working and living conditions will create more interventions as well as having more involvement towards improving the health, working and living conditions of farm workers (Herr H., 1998).

Methodology

As more information is given to immigrant farm workers the more motivation there is to make a radical change in their social group. The information given to them makes them more aware of the health issues that they are facing and how it will affect them through out their lives. For example, during the 1970s when César E. Chavez organized the farm workers, they became aware of the injustices they were facing and of the reasons why employers did not want to have unions. Having educated and well-informed workers will cause employers to pay more to their employees. Paying more will cause a rise in the prices of goods, and of course, this will mean that the grocery companies would not buy their products. The health risks that agricultural immigrant workers face depend on how long or how much they are exposed to toxic chemicals. The longer the people are exposed to pesticides the more they are at risk. Health risks not only depend on the exposure of pesticides but also because farm workers do not have legal documentation. Not having documents represents the oppression that undocumented people face.
because they feel they cannot speak or defend their rights, but it also represents that if they speak they will be deported.

The population studied on this research is the immigrant and migrant farm workers of California. Because of the size of the population, I am using probability samples. Random sampling is the most convenient sample because of the extensive number of people, and also because I want to have different perspectives of different individuals sharing the same interest. Random sampling is the fairest sample when studying a population because every individual has the same equal chance of being selected; I want for every member to have the same equal opportunity to express their opinions. Choosing a random sample also keeps my research from being biased and that is important when drawing my conclusions. Having conducted the research with a random sample, it will allow me to make reasonable generalizations as if the whole population was studied. In this research I am using quantitative date and qualitative data. Quantitative data will help me identify how many of those people, randomly selected, have or are suffering health related problems due to the high exposure to pesticides. Having a number of people who are suffering the effects of pesticides will help me inform society about the real issues that come along with working with or living near highly pesticide exposed areas. Not only will it help society, and I understand the problems that agricultural worker face, but also to health agencies understand that out of ten agricultural workers six attribute their chronic diseases, cancer, asthma, and eye and skin irritation, to pesticides exposure. On the other hand, qualitative data will keep my focus on what I see on the agricultural fields. How are pesticides being sprayed? How are people protecting themselves from these deadly chemicals? I will have a clear perspective and understanding of those individuals who are affected. Interviewing the workers
will increase the quality of my work because my audience will not only see my observations, but also what the workers have to say.

**Limitations**

Many limitations are the ones I have encountered during this research process. One of those limitations being that the group or population, which I have studied, is so large that it will not be likely to have them all studied at once. Rather, it is a process that takes time and patience to get a clear and well-objectified conclusion of the many variables that inflict in the consequences of being exposed to pesticides. Because most workers are afraid to speak up what they think about their work areas, they tend not to speak for fear of later consequences. This makes it more difficult to study the population because it is uncertain that they will give a clear answer. This research is a longitudinal research it will take more than a day or even months to be concluded. The research does not only take time but also dedication, since my objective is not just to study the way of lifestyle of farm workers, but to educate them about the many health risks that pesticides represent in their lives and in the ones of their families and children. The main limitation that I face one not language or accessibility, rather it is the time that I will need in order to achieve my objective to educate farm workers and to advocate for their rights.

**Discussion**

It is important to educate and inform the immigrant farm workers, families, and children about the risks that pesticide exposure represents in their health. Entire families need to be educated because the future of thousands of children living in or near agricultural fields is at stake and should not be taken lightly. Health care providers need to address the topic of pesticide
exposure and health conditions, which come along with being a farm worker, directly with families, as well as advocating for more just living and working conditions for farm workers and their families. Workers will be more aware of the condition they work and live in. Having informed and educated workers will, most likely, make them take action about their health and hopefully visit a doctor. Despite the 1970 movement, by César E. Chavez, there have not been concerns on changing and improving the lives of farm workers. I believe that by granting information and education to agricultural workers society will be more balanced as well as more united towards creating social change. Everyone has the right to be informed and educated, as a society we have fought for equality; so why not grant the right to be informed and educated to farm workers. It is a human basic need. Granting information and education will improve the health conditions of thousands of immigrant farm workers. I expect that when the research is completed there will be more information and education available to the agricultural workers about health risks, living and working conditions, and pesticide exposure. I also expect that information and education to be carry and distributed among the workers. Everyone deserves to live a healthy life, work and live away from deplorable conditions, and away from harmful chemicals.
References


[Footnote](http://search.proquest.com/docview/213159398?accountid=38295)


[Footnote](http://search.proquest.com/docview/201155455?accountid=38295)


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