



## Indigenous Farmworkers

Known to have joined the U.S. agricultural industry's workforce in the early 1990s, indigenous farmworkers are a population that most know little about. Most people do not know that their language is not Spanish, but rather, entirely different; their clothing and food often have cultural and traditional ties and that they have a strong affiliation towards community, local organizing, and traditional forms of medicine. The world of Western medicine, medical machinery and the healthcare process in general are unfamiliar concepts that can pose a challenge in working with this population.

### Who They Are

- Much like with race or ethnicity, it is difficult to draw parameters or guidelines around who is considered indigenous. Typically, indigenous farmworkers are farmworkers who self-identify as such and belong to an indigenous group of Mexican or Central American origin that share commonalities according to language and cultural beliefs.<sup>1 2</sup>
- Indigenous people are native to regions in the lower half of Mexico, all throughout Central and South America and among “mestizos”<sup>3</sup> or “ladinos,”<sup>4</sup> (or the non-indigenous population).
- According to the Mexican Census of 2005, the states with the highest indigenous populations are Oaxaca, Chiapas and Veracruz with 18%, 16%, and 10% of the country's total indigenous population.<sup>5</sup>
- One study found that the indigenous population in Mexico is predominantly of three different language groups: Mixteco, Zapotec and Triqui, all from the western or southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.<sup>6</sup>
- The Mexican Census in 2005 also concluded that the most common indigenous languages spoken in Mexico are Nahuatl (22.8%), Mayan languages (12.6%), Mixtec languages (7%) and Zapotec languages (6.8%).<sup>7</sup>

### History

- Indigenous people all around the world often have common, underlying social issues: they are frequently discriminated against either individually or systematically; they have almost non-existent roles in politics and society; they are typically poor, illiterate and destitute; and are or were historically victims of sexual threat, rape, exploitation and ethnic cleansing.<sup>8</sup>
- Indigenous farmworkers are from countries in Latin America that have a particular set of issues as well. Countries like Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador and Bolivia have experienced

deep, historically-rooted issues surrounding land rights and land ownership, huge disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, racism, and the systematic removal of and discrimination against indigenous language and culture.<sup>9</sup>

- Of strong significance is also the group of individuals in Latin America considered mestizos: those of European and indigenous ancestry. Even today, the tension between mestizos and indigenous groups in Latin American countries often results in discrimination and racism.<sup>10</sup>

### **Home town Networks and Culture**

- A hometown network<sup>11</sup> is a network of individuals from a small locality or village that band together due to commonalities in culture, language, social practices, etc.
- Indigenous farmworkers create hometown networks in the United States because they share many cultural traditions. The Triqui for example, have strong beliefs tied to community involvement,<sup>12</sup> and make a strong connection in the relationship between land, family traditions and identity.<sup>13</sup>
- The Mixtec have strong ties to spirituality, illness and healing<sup>14</sup> as well as kinship, altruistic practices and community identity.<sup>15</sup>
- It is for these reasons that these various cultural groups band together, especially once in the U.S. In California, the areas with the highest indigenous farmworker populations are Central Valley, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, San Diego County, Ventura County and areas just North of San Francisco.<sup>16</sup>

### **Why they Migrate?**

- Indigenous groups from Mexico have been migrating to California in large numbers since the early 1990s.<sup>17</sup>
- Initially, current indigenous farmworkers of California migrated out of Oaxaca and into other parts of Mexico to seek employment, but eventually left the country to follow the migrant farmworker streams of the United States.<sup>18</sup>
- Displacement is another important factor: the indigenous farmworkers of California tell of how increased globalization and urbanization in Mexico overtook territories on which they depended on for self-sufficiency and livelihood.<sup>19</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui had systematic trade traditions, made their own clothing, made use of the local building materials and grew their own food.<sup>20</sup>
- Today, the social status of indigenous groups in Mexico remains that of a marginalized population and in fact, the state of Oaxaca is among one of the poorest in the country.<sup>21</sup>
- A few other reasons for migration include economic depression/ instability and the deterioration of physical environment of which these groups depend strongly on for their subsistence.<sup>22</sup>

### **Health Concerns of the Indigenous in Mexico**

- Infant mortality is currently one of the most pressing health needs among indigenous groups in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Among non-indigenous Mexicans, the rate of child mortality (death occurring before the age of 5 years) is 1%.<sup>24</sup> For indigenous groups, that rate is 2%.<sup>25</sup>

- One study found high frequencies of malnourished and underweight children (up to 54%) among indigenous groups in Mexico.<sup>26</sup>
- Two other frequently-occurring health issues include pulmonary tuberculosis and maternal mortality.<sup>27</sup>
- One barrier against accessing adequate healthcare in Oaxaca, Mexico is language.<sup>28</sup> Most of the indigenous population, especially women, are not fluent in Spanish.

### **Health Concerns of the Indigenous in the United States**

- Indigenous people often opt for treatment preferences in Mexico and cross the border to receive immediate, low-cost care.<sup>29</sup>
- They also have a preference for traditional healers such as herbalists, massage specialists and spiritual healers.<sup>30</sup>
- When discussing pregnancy, indigenous women prefer to have natural childbirth and are deathly afraid of being subjected to a c-section delivery.<sup>31</sup>
- Of great concern is also the frequent occurrence of crowding and small living spaces. Poor housing implies increased risk of respiratory infections, poor nutrition due to limited food storage, poor hygiene, domestic violence and the rapid spread of epidemics.<sup>32</sup>
- Depression is also at increased risk for a population that is newly-arrived, culturally/linguistically isolated and far away from close family.<sup>33</sup>

### **Barriers against Equality and Working Conditions**

- A study conducted in Willamette Valley, Oregon concluded that of the barriers faced by indigenous farmworkers when accessing adequate occupational health and training is that standardized documentation does not exist in their native languages.<sup>34</sup>
- Also, the lack of knowledge regarding indigenous populations and their languages has further proved to be problematic.<sup>35</sup> For example, warning labels, such as those on pesticides, are only written in English and occasionally in Spanish.<sup>36</sup>
- This same study found that 30% of indigenous farmworkers responded that they had reported workplace discrimination in the past because of their language.<sup>37</sup>
- A study conducted in California concluded that indigenous farmworkers, when compared to mestizo or Latino farmworkers, often have lower wages, more dangerous working conditions and speak less English (and Spanish).<sup>38</sup>
- In terms of wages, the indigenous farmworker earns significantly less than non-indigenous farmworkers. A community survey of 225 individuals concluded that after working 9+ years in the United States, the indigenous farmworker still earns only on average \$8.25 an hour.<sup>39</sup>
- The indigenous farmworker population has only recently arrived to the United States, especially when compared to the Latino farmworker, and still holds strong ties to family in Mexico.<sup>40</sup> It is for this reason that they are less interested in attaining assets in the United States, and instead invest in assets back home in Mexico.
- In a survey that tracked the most common complaints filed by indigenous farmworker employees, results showed that 28.8% of the indigenous farmworkers polled were underpaid or unpaid and 25.4% felt discriminated against and unable to complain due to language barriers.<sup>41</sup>

- A study conducted in 2007 involving focus groups with indigenous farmworker, found that women discussed instances of sexual harassment by co-workers and supervisors, but only felt comfortable doing so among a group of women.<sup>42</sup>
  - Factors such as high poverty rates, limited access to health insurance, increased stress, anxiety and inadequate housing conditions have increased the risk of major health and safety concerns such as domestic violence, alcohol abuse and depression among this population.<sup>43</sup>
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- <sup>8</sup> United Nations, *State of the World's Indigenous People*, 2009.
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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>21</sup> Kearney, Michael. *Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs*. 2000.
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- <sup>26</sup> Sanchez-Perez, Hector Javier, et. al. *Malnutrition among Children Younger than 5-Years-Old in Conflict Zones of Chiapas, Mexico*. American Journal of Public Health. 2007.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
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<sup>29</sup> Mines, R., Nichols, S., and Runsten, D. *California's Indigenous Farmworkers*. Available online: [www.indigenousfarmworkers.org](http://www.indigenousfarmworkers.org)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Samples, J. et al. *Pesticide Exposure and Occupational Safety Training of Indigenous Farmworkers in Oregon*. 2009

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>37</sup> Samples, J. et al. *Pesticide Exposure and Occupational Safety Training of Indigenous Farmworkers in Oregon*. 2009

<sup>38</sup> Mines, R., Nichols, S., and Runsten, D. *California's Indigenous Farmworkers*. Available online: [www.indigenousfarmworkers.org](http://www.indigenousfarmworkers.org)

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