

## **COVID-19 in Rural America: Impact on Farms & Agricultural Workers**

*Note: NCFH typically relies on peer-reviewed research and government reports for its fact sheet series, but due to the urgent and constantly evolving nature of the pandemic, we have utilized reputable media sources as well. This fact sheet will be updated on a weekly basis.*

*Last updated: May 27, 2020*

### **Impact of COVID-19 in Rural America**

- As of May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, 90% of rural counties in America were reporting positive COVID-19 cases. More than 118,000 rural residents have tested positive for COVID-19 and 4,552 deaths among rural Americans have been attributed to the disease.<sup>1</sup>
- The current case rate in rural counties is 23.60 cases per 10,000 residents and the current death rate is 0.98 per 10,000 residents.<sup>1</sup>
- Epidemiologists generally consider rural Americans more vulnerable to the pandemic than urban Americans. Higher proportions of elderly persons, higher smoking usage, higher prevalence of certain chronic diseases, and lower proportions of persons covered by health insurance contribute to this vulnerability.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Emerging research is beginning to demonstrate stark disparities in the rate of COVID cases and COVID-related deaths among people of color in the U.S., a pattern that has emerged in both urban and rural areas.<sup>4,5</sup> A major factor in this disparity is likely due to the fact that a high proportion of essential workers are people of color and thus have greater risk of exposure.<sup>6</sup>
- A lack of physicians and in-patient hospital beds is another major concern for rural areas that will experience a relatively high number of COVID-19 cases. Nearly half of rural hospitals operate in a financial deficit, and many hospitals have had to lay-off or temporarily furlough staff or completely close their doors due to the financial impact of the pandemic.<sup>1,7</sup>
- Cases and deaths from COVID-19 have generally been higher in metropolitan areas of the U.S., but non-metropolitan areas of the U.S. have seen rapidly increasing numbers of cases and deaths in late April and early May.<sup>8</sup> The Navajo Nation now has the highest per-capita coronavirus infection rate in the nation, higher than New York or New Jersey, with 2,304.41 cases per 100,000 residents.<sup>9</sup>

## COVID-19 on American Farms

- The widespread shutdowns of businesses, schools, and universities have had a dramatic economic impact on American farms. Corn prices have fallen by 15% since February, dairy prices have fallen by 28%, and beef and pork prices have fallen by more than 30%.<sup>10</sup>
- Farm bankruptcies in the U.S. were up by 23% from March 2019 to March 2020, the third-highest level in the past two decades. The number is expected to increase sharply during the pandemic.<sup>11</sup>
- No comprehensive testing or reporting of positive COVID cases among agricultural workers is being systematically conducted, but some case clusters among agricultural workers are being reported in the media:
  - A large outbreak of COVID-19 is occurring in Madison County, New York, where 169 workers from a single farm have tested positive for coronavirus. Public health officials raised concerns about a lack of isolation procedures during transportation to and from the farm and in the workers' sleeping quarters.<sup>12</sup> OSHA is conducting an investigation at the farm.<sup>13</sup>
  - Fifty-nine agricultural workers in Upper Pittsgrove Township, New Jersey have tested positive for coronavirus, over half of the town's seasonal agricultural labor force.<sup>14</sup> More than 50 farm workers on a specialty crop farm in Gloucester County, New Jersey have tested for coronavirus as of late May.<sup>15</sup> A total of over 400 farm workers have tested positive in the state of New Jersey, and at least 2 workers have died from the disease.<sup>16</sup>
  - Over 70 farm and fruit-packing workers in Yakima County, Washington have tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>17</sup>
  - Thirty-six orchard workers in Chelan County, Washington tested positive for COVID-19, out of the 71 workers tested on a single farm.<sup>18</sup>
  - A reported 110 agricultural workers in Monterey County, California have tested positive for the virus.<sup>19</sup> Other outbreaks among farmworkers are being reported in California among fruit and vegetable packing house workers.<sup>20</sup> Over 35 employees of Calavo Growers in Ventura County tested positive in early May.<sup>21</sup>
  - Stemlit Growers in Chelan County, Washington have reported two separate outbreaks among their agricultural workers.<sup>22</sup> In late April, the company announced that 36 of their 71 H-2A workers had tested positive for the virus, and in late May another outbreak occurred in one of their packing houses, where 25 out of 60 workers tested positive.
  - Eight COVID-19 positive cases were reported among employees of a strawberry farm in Guilford County, North Carolina. State officials linked the exposure to the on-site housing for farm employees.<sup>23</sup> Five other outbreaks among farm workers in North Carolina have been reported by the state department of health, with at least 49 positive cases among farmworkers in the state.<sup>24</sup>

- Although the exact number of cases among farm workers in Yuma County, Arizona is not reported, 143 positive COVID-19 cases in the county had occurred in or near farm labor camps.<sup>25</sup>

### **COVID-19 among Agricultural Workers**

- Even though America's agricultural workers have been classified as "critical infrastructure" workers (also known as essential workers), many lack essential protections and benefits:
  - The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has not provided clear guidance on employers' responsibility to provide PPE to employees to protect them from exposure to COVID-19.<sup>26</sup> Even if clear guidance was available, OSHA cannot conduct inspections or enforce health and safety standards on farms with 10 or fewer employees.<sup>27</sup>
  - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released guidance for employers stating that critical infrastructure workers who have had contact with individuals with COVID-19 can still continue to work as long as they are asymptomatic,<sup>6</sup> which may put other essential workers at increased risk of exposure.
  - An estimated 49% of horticulture workers lack work authorization to work in the U.S.<sup>28</sup> This means that at least half of all horticulture workers are not able to access unemployment benefits if they are laid off or furloughed.<sup>29</sup> Undocumented workers were also not eligible to receive the federal stimulus money sent to families through the CARES Act.<sup>30</sup> U.S. citizen spouses married to a spouse without a Social Security number are also ineligible, which may impact many agricultural worker households with mixed immigration status.
- A few states have begun implementing special protections to protect agricultural workers from exposure to COVID-19. The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration will implement new rules to be in effect from May 11, 2020 through October 28, 2020 and will require more toilets and handwashing stations in the field, cleaning of those facilities three times a day, and spacing requirements for transportation and beds in employer-provided housing.<sup>31</sup>
- Overcrowded and substandard housing conditions is a major concern for the potential of COVID-19 to spread through agricultural worker communities.<sup>32,33</sup> A single building may house several dozen workers, who often sleep in dormitory-style quarters, making quarantining or social distancing efforts difficult if not impossible. Limited access to restrooms and sinks, at home and in the field, may complicate hygiene prevention efforts.<sup>34</sup>

- Extremely low annual incomes and a widespread lack of access to health insurance may limit health care-seeking behaviors among agricultural workers, even if they are experiencing symptoms of an illness.<sup>28,35</sup>

Keywords: rural health, farmworker health, covid-19, coronavirus, rural epidemiology

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