



INDIGENOUS AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

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. Many do not know that their primary language is not Spanish, that their clothing and food have strong traditional cultural ties, and that many indigenous persons have a strong affiliation towards community networks, local organizing and political activities, and traditional forms of medicine. Because research literature indicates that the overwhelming majority of indigenous persons employed in U.S. agriculture are from Latin America and not the U.S., we focus on Latin American indigenous groups in this research brief.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Approximately 40 million people in Latin America self-identify as ethnically indigenous.¹
- Latin America's indigenous populations are highly diverse in culture, language, food, and religion. An estimated 550-700 different languages in more than 50 different language families are spoken in Latin America. The most commonly spoken indigenous languages spoken in Latin America include Quechua (South America), Guaraní (Paraguay), Nahuatl (México), and Kekchí (Guatemala). Many languages are endangered and will likely lose their last surviving speakers in the next century.²
- The Indigenous Farmworkers Study (IFS) is the most comprehensive study of indigenous farmworkers in the U.S. to date. The IFS is limited to farmworkers residing in California, but is the best current source of information about the demographics of indigenous farmworkers in the U.S. The IFS estimated that 165,000 indigenous farmworkers from Mexico were residing in California, and that the majority originated from the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca in Mexico.³
- Of the indigenous languages spoken by participants in the IFS study, Mixteco was the most common, as more than half of participants were Mixteco speakers. One in four spoke Zapoteco and one in ten spoke Triqui. A small number of participants spoke Nahuatl or Chatino.³

HISTORY

- The indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America have a complex history that demonstrates an ability to survive and thrive despite experiencing hundreds of years of violence from Spaniards and later from their own national governments.³⁻⁵
- In recent history, poverty and systemic violence have caused indigenous peoples in Latin America to leave their hometowns and migrate to larger urban areas in their own country, as was the case of the Maya-speaking Mexicans from Yucatan, or to work in agricultural or the service sector in the U.S.⁶ The first documented movements of indigenous Mexicans to the U.S. occurred during the 1960s when the Bracero program gave work authorization to Mexicans willing to work in the U.S. agricultural fields.⁶

- In the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of Guatemalan indigenous persons fled to Mexico and later to the U.S. during the brutal civil war because the military considered indigenous Mayans as threats to the state and executed systematic acts of genocide in indigenous communities.⁵
- Latin American indigenous peoples have created multiple notorious political movements to advocate for greater access to health care, education, economic opportunities, rights to land, and recognition of their languages and traditions.^{7,8} One of the most well-known movements is the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), a political group of indigenous residents of Chiapas, Mexico that has pushed for bilingual education, local autonomy and basic human rights for indigenous peoples in Mexico.^{9,10}

HOMETOWN NETWORKS

- Hometown networks are an important aspect of the culture of indigenous people living in the U.S. Many indigenous persons from Mexico and Central America were part of close-knit rural communities in their home country, and these close ties often follow people as they migrate to the U.S. Hometown networks are essentially groups of people from the same region in the sending country who share resources, advice, traditions, and other forms of support.¹¹
- The IFS in California documented nine hometown networks of indigenous farmworkers residing in the U.S. Some of the hometown networks were well-established, as male members had resided in the U.S. for decades and had brought their wives and children to live in the U.S. Newer, less-established hometown networks consisted of younger males who more recently left Mexico for work in the U.S.¹¹

WORKING CONDITIONS

- Working conditions for indigenous farmworkers in the U.S. is poorly documented, but the little research that does exist indicates that indigenous farmworkers face the same abuses and challenges of other farmworkers, if not more so. Non-Spanish speaking indigenous persons may be more isolated and face greater barriers to filing complaints about workplace safety or labor rights abuses, and persons who physically appear indigenous may face discrimination from non-indigenous Latinos and from Anglo Americans.^{1,12}
- The medical anthropologist Dr. Seth Holmes provides one of the most extensive accounts published about the working conditions for indigenous farmworkers in the U.S. In his book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, he describes extreme poverty, extremely physically demanding labor, and frequent exposure to pesticides and other occupational hazards for indigenous farmworkers.¹³
- Research conducted with indigenous farmworker women in Oregon found that sexual harassment at work was commonplace, and women frequently did not report it, either because they did not know how to report or out of fear of retaliation.¹⁴ Single mothers reportedly experienced greater levels of sexual harassment, generally from men in supervisory positions, as they were more vulnerable and could not afford to lose work.

DISCRIMINATION

- Latin America has the worst income inequality in the world, and indigenous populations are generally concentrated in the lowest social strata throughout Latin America. Social discrimination is strong, but little public policy has been produced to address widespread discrimination and disparities experienced by indigenous and Black Latin Americans.¹⁵

- Indigenous persons experience discrimination in both their home countries and in the U.S. due to skin tone, language, cultural practices, and body type.^{16,17}

HEALTH IN LATIN AMERICA

- In Latin America, ethnicity, skin tone, socio-economic status and discrimination are all deeply interwoven. Researchers investigating the relationships between an indigenous ethnicity and self-reported health found that persons who identified as indigenous reported the worst health status of all groups, which included both non-indigenous White and Black Latinos.¹
- Health inequities among indigenous peoples throughout Latin America are well-documented. Maternal health outcomes are generally substantially worse among indigenous women compared to non-indigenous women, and both infant and maternal mortality rates are greater among indigenous women. In Mexico, indigenous women are five times more likely to die in childbirth than non-indigenous women.¹⁸ Reasons for this are complex, and include high rates of poverty and malnutrition, rural isolation, and limited access to health care facilities.¹⁹
- Indigenous children in Mexico and Guatemala have been found to experience much higher rates of infant and childhood mortality and stunting & malnutrition.^{18,20} In Brazil, indigenous children were found to have high rates of malnutrition, diarrheal illnesses and respiratory infections, both common causes of childhood mortality.^{21,22}

HEALTH IN THE U.S.

- Indigenous immigrants in the U.S. face multiple barriers to accessing high-quality health services. This issue is particularly acute for female indigenous immigrants, and language barriers, a lack of health insurance, and different cultural perceptions of health and disease may make accessing health care difficult.^{12,23}
- Ethnographic research found that the perceptions of U.S. medical professionals was often inhibitive to the provision of culturally-sensitive and high-quality medical care to indigenous farmworkers, rather than the perceptions of indigenous patients.²⁴
- The IFS found that only 9% of indigenous farmworker participants had health insurance coverage, substantially lower than the 31% of non-indigenous Latino farmworkers who have health insurance coverage.³
- A survey of nearly 1,000 indigenous persons in California found that only 57% of adults reported that they had access to health care services, although 90% of participants reported that their children had access to health care services.¹⁸
- More than half (59%) of indigenous persons in Ventura County, California reported that their family did not have enough food, and 48% reported difficulties in gaining adequate housing.²⁵
- In the U.S., research has found that indigenous persons, especially indigenous women, experience poorer mental health and higher stress levels than non-indigenous Latinos. Higher stress levels were found to decline with higher education levels, better literacy, and increased time in the U.S. for indigenous persons.²⁶

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