



## INDIGENOUS AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

Known to have joined the U.S. agricultural industry's workforce in the early 1940s, Indigenous agricultural workers are an often overlooked population.<sup>1</sup> For example, many non-Indigenous people assume that Indigenous communities speak Spanish; while in fact, Indigenous communities often speak Indigenous languages. For many Indigenous communities, clothing and food have strong traditional, cultural ties, and many Indigenous Peoples have a strong connection to the environment, community networks, local organizing and political activities, and traditional forms of medicine. Because research indicates that the overwhelming majority of Indigenous Peoples employed in U.S. agriculture are from Latin America and not the U.S., this research brief focuses on Latin American Indigenous groups.

### BACKGROUND

- Approximately 40 million people in Latin America self-identify as ethnically Indigenous.<sup>2</sup>
- 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.<sup>3</sup> Quechua is the most spoken Indigenous language in the Americas with between 10 and 12 million speakers. Other Indigenous language groups include Mayan languages with more than 6 million speakers, followed by Guaraní (Paraguay) with 5 million speakers, Aymara (Andean mountains) with 2.5 million speakers, Nahuatl (México) with 1.5 to over 2 million speakers, and Mapudungun (Chile and Southwest Argentina) with 500,000 to 1 million speakers.<sup>4</sup> All of these language families have different language variants that are connected to the lands on which they are spoken. For example, Zapoteco is spoken by Indigenous Peoples in multiple parts of Mexico, and has over 60 different variants.<sup>5</sup> Each variant is its own language, and is typically named after the region where it is spoken (e.g., Zapoteco del Valle, Zapoteco de Petapa).
- The Indigenous Farmworkers Study (IFS) is a comprehensive study conducted of Indigenous agricultural workers residing in California from 2007-2009. The IFS estimated that 165,000 Indigenous agricultural workers from Mexico were residing in California, and that the majority originated from the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca de Juarez in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Of the Indigenous languages spoken by participants in the IFS study, Mixteco was the most common, with Mixteco speakers representing more than half of participants. One in four spoke Zapoteco and one in ten spoke Triqui. A small number of participants spoke Nahuatl or Chatino.<sup>6</sup>
- The National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) conducted in 2017-2018 reported that 6% of crop production workers are considered Indigenous<sup>1</sup> by self-identified race, language, and/or heritage language. These workers are primarily in the state of California.<sup>7</sup>
- Indigenous Peoples in Central, South America, and the Caribbean disproportionately experience poverty in their region. Eighty-one percent of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico are considered "extremely poor" by the United Nations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous Peoples are severely undercounted in both the U.S. Census and the NAWS.

## HISTORY

- The Indigenous Peoples of Mexico and Central America have a complex history that demonstrates resiliency despite experiencing hundreds of years of violence from Spaniards and later from their own national governments.<sup>6,9,10</sup>
- In recent history, poverty and systemic violence caused Indigenous Peoples in Latin America to leave their hometowns and migrate to larger urban areas in their own country, or to pursue work in agriculture or the service sector in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> The first documented movements of Indigenous Mexicans to the U.S. occurred during the 1940s, when the Bracero program gave work authorization to Mexicans willing to work temporarily in the U.S. agricultural fields.<sup>11</sup>
- In the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of Guatemalan Indigenous Peoples fled to Mexico and later to the U.S. during the civil war. During the war, the military considered Indigenous Mayans as threats to the state and executed systematic acts of genocide in Indigenous communities.<sup>10</sup>
- Latin American Indigenous Peoples have created and continue to create multiple political movements to advocate for greater access to health care, education, economic opportunities, rights to land, and recognition of their languages and traditions.<sup>12,13</sup> 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.<sup>14,15</sup>
- Indigenous agricultural workers are also part of organizing movements in the U.S. Starting in the 1990s, Indigenous Mexican agricultural workers made up more than one third of the membership of the Pineros y Campesinos Unidos/ Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN), a long-serving farmworker rights organization in Oregon. PCUN organized campaigns to raise awareness among Indigenous agricultural workers about sexual harassment and pesticide use, as well as supported change in legislation to improve working conditions, such as increasing wages, for Indigenous workers.<sup>16</sup>

## HOMETOWN NETWORKS

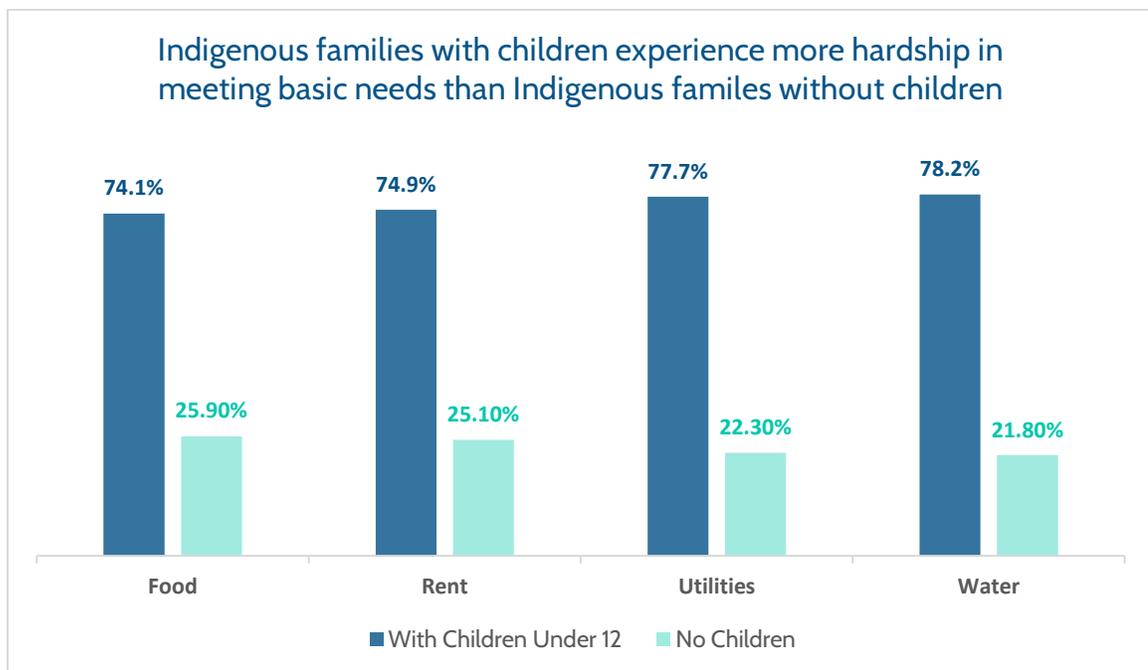
- Hometown networks are an important aspect of the culture of Indigenous Peoples living in the U.S. Many Indigenous Peoples from Mexico and Central America were part of close-knit rural communities in their home country, and these close ties often follow people as they migrate to the U.S. Hometown networks are groups of people from the same region in their home country who share resources, advice, traditions, and other forms of support.<sup>17</sup>
- The IFS reported 500 Mexican Indigenous Hometown networks among California agricultural workers.<sup>6</sup> Public health and healthcare entities rely on Hometown Associations (HTAs) to reach Indigenous Peoples in hometown networks. However, HTAs are often volunteer-based and have limited access to resources. Research suggests investment in leadership and organizational capacity of HTAs is critical when partnering with HTAs to promote health and reach Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. For example, a pilot program in Los Angeles provided mini-grants and skill-building workshops to HTAs with immigrant populations from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua to strengthen their organizational capacity to better support the health of their community.<sup>18</sup>

## WORKING CONDITIONS

- Research indicates that Indigenous agricultural workers face the same, if not more, abuses and challenges as other agricultural workers. Non-Spanish speaking Indigenous Peoples may be more isolated and face greater barriers to filing complaints about workplace safety or labor rights abuse, and persons who physically appear Indigenous may face discrimination from non-Indigenous Latinos and Anglo Americans.<sup>2,19</sup>
- In an extensive account of working conditions among Indigenous agricultural workers, researchers found that Indigenous agricultural workers face a working environment that includes extreme poverty, extremely

physically demanding labor, frequent exposure to pesticides, and exposure to other occupational hazards.<sup>20</sup>

- Research conducted with Indigenous agricultural women workers in Oregon in 2006 and 2008 found that **sexual** harassment at work was commonplace and often went unreported, either because the victims did not know how to report or out of fear of retaliation.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Purhépecha (speaking Tarascan) populations which come from Michoacan and migrate to California, Texas, and Illinois also experience sexual harassment in the workplace.<sup>22</sup>
- The IFS found that a third of Indigenous agricultural workers earn less than the minimum wage. The IFS also reported that Indigenous agricultural workers who work with labor contractors are more likely to be paid by piece rate, required to pay for their own equipment, and to pay for their own travel.<sup>23</sup>
- The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated poor working conditions for Indigenous agricultural workers. In a study of the lived experiences of Indigenous Campesinos (agricultural workers) in California during the COVID-19 pandemic, workers shared that their wage is unlivable and they cannot afford either rent or food. They also indicated that some picking jobs did not pay enough for expenses like daily transportation to work and childcare. Low wages have led to homelessness for some workers. Indigenous agricultural workers also reported abuse before and during the pandemic, including receiving threats of being fired if not working fast enough, lack of drinking water, and unsanitary restrooms. Due to the pandemic, some Indigenous agricultural workers have reported less working hours, especially in indoor packing houses.<sup>24</sup>



Source: Expert in Their Fields: Contributions and Realities of Indigenous Campesinos in California during COVID-19, 2021.

## DISCRIMINATION

- Indigenous populations are generally concentrated in the lowest social strata throughout Latin America. Despite widespread social discrimination, little public policy has been produced to address discrimination and disparities experienced by Indigenous and Black Latin Americans.<sup>25</sup>

- Indigenous communities experience discrimination in both their home countries and in the U.S. due to racism, language, cultural practices, and body type.<sup>26,27</sup> Indigenous children experience prejudice and racial slurs, including from other Latinos.<sup>28</sup>
- Indigenous communities are also more vulnerable than peer communities during natural disasters. A case study with Indigenous agricultural workers who lived in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties of California during the Thomas Fire in 2017 found government agencies were initially communicating emergency response information in English, making it difficult for Indigenous communities to prepare for evacuation and shelter. There was also a lack of labor protections for endangered agricultural workers during the fire because emergency response resources were allocated to privileged communities.<sup>29</sup>

## HEALTH IN LATIN AMERICA

- Researchers investigating the relationship between 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.<sup>2</sup>
- Both infant and maternal mortality rates are greater among Indigenous women than non-Indigenous women in Mexico.<sup>30</sup> In Mexico, Indigenous women are five times more likely to die in childbirth than non-Indigenous women.<sup>30</sup> Reasons for this are complex, and include high rates of poverty and malnutrition, rural isolation, and limited access to health care facilities.<sup>31</sup> In Colombia, the Indigenous Wayuu Peoples infant mortality rate (IMR) was 111 per 1,000 births in 2003, compared to the average IMR in Columbia being 19 per 1,000.<sup>32</sup> High IMRs are consistent among Indigenous Peoples across Latin America.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous children in Mexico and Guatemala have been found to experience much higher rates of infant and childhood mortality, stunting, and malnutrition.<sup>30,33</sup> In Brazil, Indigenous children were found to have high rates of malnutrition, diarrheal illnesses and respiratory infections, both common causes of childhood mortality.<sup>34,35</sup>

## HEALTH IN THE U.S.

- Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by COVID -19. In a recent study conducted in California's Salinas Valley from July 16<sup>th</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup> of 2020, 1,107 agricultural workers were tested for SARS-CoV-2. Workers who spoke an Indigenous language at home were more likely to test positive than those who spoke Spanish.<sup>37</sup>
- Research suggests that Indigenous Peoples, 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 Peoples.<sup>38</sup>
- Oregon Migrant Health Outreach Project conducted a depression screening on 123 Indigenous agricultural workers. Results indicate that Indigenous participants who had high rates of depression reported lower self-esteem and self-efficacy, high perceived acculturation stress, stress due to language difficulties and discrimination, and functional impairment in areas such as occupation and social functioning.<sup>39</sup>
- More than half (59%) of Indigenous Peoples in Ventura County, California reported that their family did not have enough food, and 48% reported difficulties in gaining adequate housing.<sup>36</sup>

## BARRIERS TO HEALTH CARE

- Barriers to health care include lack of translation and interpretation services.<sup>24</sup>
- Research identifies language barriers, a lack of health insurance, and different cultural perceptions of health and disease may make accessing health care difficult.<sup>19,40</sup>
- A study examining cultural and social determinants of health among Indigenous Mexicans in the U.S. found that Indigenous female participants experienced high depression severity, higher perceived discrimination,

low self-esteem, and poor self-reported mental and physical health.<sup>19</sup> A research study conducted in California interviewed 44 Mixtec and Zapotec women who reported inability to afford health care costs, faced long wait times, rushed encounters with providers, and sought Western medical help only when home remedies did not help.<sup>41</sup>

- In a study with clinicians treating Indigenous agricultural workers within health clinics along the migration route of Oaxaca de Juarez, Mexico, through California, and into Washington state during 2003-2007 found structural factors, such as racism, lack of insurance, lack of interpretation services among others, create barriers to health care for migratory and Indigenous workers. Additionally, clinicians' perceptions of Indigenous workers, including stereotypes and perceptions of cultural traditions, led to blaming patients for disease and overlooking social determinants of health.<sup>42</sup>
- 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.<sup>18</sup>
- The IFS found that only 9% of Indigenous agricultural worker participants had health insurance coverage, substantially lower than the 31% of non-Indigenous Latino agricultural workers who have health insurance coverage.<sup>6</sup>

## HEALTH EDUCATION OUTREACH

- Indigenous languages such as Mixteco and Zapoteco are primarily oral languages that need to be made linguistically accessible.<sup>43</sup> A research study investigated the benefits of delivering women's health education through radio station workshops in Mixteco. Results showed an increase in knowledge among participants regarding mammography screening guidelines and accessing wellness visits; and 43% of participants reported completing a wellness visit.<sup>43</sup>
- Agricultural workers are known to listen to radio as they work in the fields, making this medium a good strategy to disseminate information. One case study illustrates using radio with social media to reach its immediate community, as well as raise awareness with a global audience. The Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) created Radio Indígena 94.1, an all-volunteer community radio station that disseminates information in Indigenous languages to inform its listeners on urgent community issues, local news, access to health care, and coverage of natural disasters.<sup>44</sup> Radio Indígena's success is in part due to its use of Facebook and visual storytelling from the fields of Ventura County California. This strategy has been particularly successful in disseminating urgent information in disasters and catching the attention of national media during disasters, as well as injustices.<sup>44</sup>

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