Farmworker COVID-19 Community Assessments

El Paso County, Texas & Doña Ana County, New Mexico Community Profile

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2021

MIGRANT HEALTH

NCFH

National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc.

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Acknowledgements

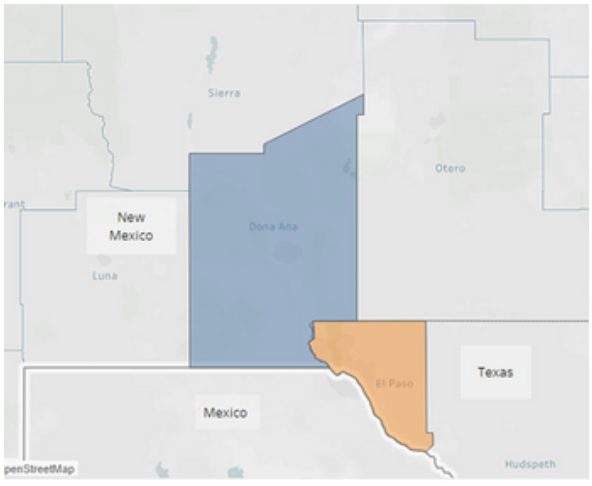
NCFH would like to thank the Centro De Los Trabajadores Agricolas Fronterizos for their tireless work supporting farmworkers in El Paso and Doña Ana counties and for their enthusiastic support recruiting workers to participate in this assessment. We are grateful for the diligent work of JBS International on this assessment, which would have not been possible without their efforts and their expertise. We are especially grateful to the interview participants who gave us their time to help us understand local challenges and strengths, and to the farmworkers who provided their time, knowledge, and insight to this assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report provides a profile of farmworkers and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in two neighboring counties- El Paso County in Texas and Doña Ana County in New Mexico. This assessment was conducted as part of the Farmworker COVID-19 Community Assessments (FCCA) for the National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) conducted from August to December 2021. These assessments are part of a national outreach and vaccination project funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). . Farmworkers are a particularly vulnerable population during a public health emergency due to their travel, working, and living conditions. The purpose of the FCCA project was to develop and implement data collection methodologies that could quickly be activated during a public health emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid assessment provides CDC and others with actionable findings about farmworkers' experiences and recommendations on how to best meet their needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report is one in a series of community assessments conducted with farmworkers in diverse rural communities in different parts of the U.S. These counties were selected due to the location being an important migration pathway for farmworkers. The local farm labor force includes individuals who reside in Mexico but cross the border daily to work in the U.S., individuals who reside in the U.S., and H-2A guest workers.

Figure 2.1. El Paso County and Doña Ana County seated at the border of Mexico and the United States



2. BACKGROUND ON EL PASO COUNTY AND DONA AÑA COUNTY

Two neighboring counties were selected in the states of Texas and New Mexico for this assessment, El Paso County and Doña Ana County (see Figure 2.1). El Paso County, Texas and Dona Aña County, New Mexico were included in the project because they represent a prominent growing area next to the U.S.-Mexico border and share a farm labor force that includes commuters crossing both state and national borders and settled residents.

El Paso County, Texas has a population of 865,657 people and 86% of products sold are crop products (see Table 2.1).(1,2) Doña Ana County, New Mexico has a smaller population of 219,561 people and about two-thirds (62%) of products produced in the county are from crop production, with the major crop being pecans.(1,3) In addition to pecans, this area also produces cotton, chiles, and onions.

NCFH estimates that there are 928 farmworkers in El Paso County and 4,587 farmworkers in Doña Ana County, based on the 2017 Census of Agriculture. There were only 70 reported H-2A workers in the area in 2020.(4)

"The three main crops in this area are chiles, onions, and pecans. In the fall, the harvest includes cayenne red chiles, followed by cotton. Pecan season starts in December. Grapes and alfalfa are also planted and harvested in this region."
-Organizational representative #5

Some of the Indigenous farm workers who come from Southern Mexico, like from Chiapas, from Oaxaca, they cross through here, but they don't stay in this area, they go someplace, they try to go to the northwest or to the West Coast to work. For the past six years we have also seen an increase on H-2A workers this year, we estimate that for the chili harvest, they brought about 100 H-2A workers.
- Organizational representative #5

Table 2.1. Key agricultural data for El Paso and Dona Aña counties

County	County population	Number of farms	Average farm size in acres	Agricultural sales	Major agricultural commodities
El Paso	865,657	656	217	$46 million	Cotton and pecans
Dona Ana	219,561	1,949	286	$370 million	Pecans

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture 2017, U.S. Census Bureau.

3. METHODOLOGY

The FCCA's methodology included both a quantitative and a qualitative component and was based on the CDC's rapid community assessment methodology.(5) To recruit respondents, JBS International and NCFH partnered with a local farmworker organization, Centro De Los Trabajadores Agrícolas Fronterizos. This assessment received a non-research exemption by the CDC; therefore, IRB approval was not needed. This report summarizes quantitative data and key quotes from interview participants; an in-depth thematic analysis of qualitative data is forthcoming.

Quantitative survey respondents were eligible to participate if they were a farmworker, which included individuals who had been employed in an industry under NAICS codes 111, 112, 1111, or 1112, which includes both crop and animal production and support activities for those industries. They were eligible to participate if they had worked in agriculture one day or more since March 15, 2020. The survey examined farmworkers' knowledge, attitudes and practices related to the COVID-19 emergency with a focus on vaccination coverage, as well as structural factors that CDC and other federal, state, and local agencies and organizations could address, such as barriers to safety, healthcare access, testing and vaccination. Respondents were recruited through outreach efforts of the local outreach organization at worksites, housing sites, the organization's center, and public community sites such as grocery stores, restaurants, and paycheck offices.

Before participating in the survey, all respondents were provided with a verbal informed consent that emphasized that all data collected would be anonymous, no individual data would be shared publicly, and that they could stop participating in the survey at any time. The survey took between 15 and 30 minutes to complete, and survey participants received a $30 gift card for their participation. The surveys were conducted in English and Spanish over the phone with JBS International staff. Descriptive statistics for the survey data are provided below. All survey data are unweighted.

The qualitative component consisted of in-depth interviews in English or Spanish with farmworkers and agricultural employers and key informant interviews with agricultural experts or representatives of farmworker-serving organizations, and interviews delved more deeply into patterns raised during the survey. Farmworkers were identified by local organizations or during survey data collection. Employers were generally cold-called or identified by local organizations. Farmworker experts and representatives of farmworker-serving organizations were identified through NCFH's database of farmworker-serving organizations and through snowball techniques. Interview participants received $100 for their time, and generally lasted between 30-90 minutes.

4. KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

A total of 207 surveys were completed in El Paso and Doña Ana counties from August to October 2021. All surveys were conducted over the phone by JBS International. Respondents for phone surveys were recruited by representatives from the partner organization, Centro De Los Trabajadores Agricolas Fronterizos. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with farmworkers and employers, and eight key informant interviews were conducted with local farmworker experts or representatives of local farmworker-serving organizations.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The 207 respondents interviewed in El Paso and Doña Ana Counties were mainly male and middle-aged with a median age of 45, Mexican-born (74%), and primarily spoke Spanish (99%) (see Table 4.1). Eighteen percent of respondents self-identified their race as Hispanic or Latinx, 18% Mestizo, and 8% Moreno. Forty-four percent identified their race as White. Nearly all participants (98%) identified as ethnically Hispanic or Latinx. Two respondents spoke a Latin American Indigenous language. The sample included no H-2A workers. Four out of five participants were either permanent residents (49%) or citizens (31%) of the United States.

INDIGENOUS WORKERS

While there is no official definition for who are considered Indigenous populations, it is recognized that Indigenous populations continue to practice social and cultural traditions that pre-date colonial societies.(6) Latin America's Indigenous populations are diverse in their culture, language, food, and religious practices. Historically, Indigenous populations experience higher levels of discrimination due to their cultural practices including language, lifestyle and food, as well as based on physical appearance.(7) This is evident by the ongoing violence experienced by these populations since the beginning of colonization and the on-going socioeconomic disparities, such as the continued social marginalization from the rest of society due to the lack of educational and economic resources, experienced under current governments.(8,9) Starting in the 1960s, the first documented en masse migration of Indigenous populations to the U.S. happened through the Bracero program. Currently the number of Indigenous populations in the U.S. keeps growing due to work, and social and economic migration, or due to displacement from violence and environmental reasons, such as climate change.(10,11) The racial and ethnicity categories traditionally used for census purposes may not fully encapsulate Indigenous identity of Latin American born individuals or be recognized by this population. Due to the discrimination experienced, they may not want to be identified as being racially Indigenous. In this survey following the National Agricultural Workers Survey convention, NCFH created a composite metric to identify Indigenous respondents, utilizing a combination of responses from language spoken as a child and currently as an adult, as well as racially identifying as Indigenous.(12)

In this sample, 11 respondents were identified under the Indigenous metric, compromising 5% of all respondents. This is similar to the national percentage of farmworkers that identify as indigenous based on the NAWS (12). There were two Indigenous language families captured in this sample: Mixteco and Zapoteco. Mixteco is the language family in Mexico with the most variants, with a total of 81. The states with the largest number of speakers are Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla.(13) Zapoteco is the language family with the second most variants in Mexico, with a total of 62. Zapoteco is primarily spoken in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz.(14)

20% of survey respondents migrated for work in agriculture in the past year.

Table 4.1: Demographics

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage of participants
Sex		
Male	148	72%
Female	59	28%
Age groups		
18-25 years	26	13%
26-54 years	84	41%
55 years or more	97	47%
Marital status		
Single	73	35%
Married	91	44%
Other (i.e., domestic partnership, widowed)	43	21%
Primary language(s) spoken as child*		
English	15	7%
Spanish	203	98%
Latin American Indigenous language	2	1%
Primary language(s) spoken as adult*		
English	51	25%
Spanish	204	99%
Latin American Indigenous Language	1	<1%
Country of birth		
United States	48	23%
Mexico	153	74%
Central American Country	4	2%
Other/did not report	2	1%
Race		
Black/African-American	5	2%
Indigenous	9	4%
White	91	44%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	<1%
Other/multiple races	98	47%
Hispanic/Latinx	38	18%
Mestizo	37	18%
Moreno	16	8%
Other	7	3%
Did not report	11	5%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latinx	203	98%
Not Hispanic/Latinx	3	1%
Other	1	<1%
Immigration status		
Permanent resident	101	49%
Undocumented	31	15%
U.S. citizen	64	31%
Other visa	9	4%
Did not report/unknown	2	1%
Migrated to work in agriculture in past 12 months**		
Yes	41	20%
No	166	80%

**Participants could choose more than one option.*

***Migration was defined as staying in a place different than the interview location for one week or more to work in agriculture. All H-2A guest workers were automatically classified as migratory.*

HOUSING, HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS, AND TRANSPORTATION

The most common living situations for respondents in these counties were mobile homes/trailers/RVs (33%). Other common housing types included houses (23%) and apartments (23%) (see Table 4.2). Respondents had a median household size of four individuals. All persons who slept in the same building were counted as household members.

A large proportion of respondents reported experiencing major risk factors for COVID-19 transmission in housing and transportation.(15) Most participants (58%) traveled to work with other workers who they did not live with and 27% lived in overcrowded housing.(16)

GENERAL HEALTH CARE ACCESS & SOURCES OF HEALTH INFORMATION

A relatively small proportion of respondents (21%) reported utilizing health care services in the U.S. during the pandemic (see Table 4.3). Among those who utilized health care services in the U.S., the hospital/emergency room was the most common source (41%). When respondents were asked about where they would go for trusted information about a serious health issue, either in the U.S. or in their country of origin, nearly two-thirds said a doctor or nurse (63%). Twenty-six percent of respondents reported using social media as a trusted source of health information, and 21% relied on a relative.

Table 4.2: Housing type, transportation, and risk factors for infectious disease transmission

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage of participants
Type of housing		
Apartment	48	23%
Barracks/dormitory	16	8%
House	47	23%
Mobile home/trailer/RV	69	33%
Other	27	13%
Type of transportation used to get to work		
Drives own car	77	37%
Labor bus	52	25%
Raitero	51	25%
Rides with relative or co-worker	21	10%
Walk/rides bicycle	4	2%
Other	2	1%
Housing and transportation risk factors		
Lives in an overcrowded household*	55	27%
Lives in employer-provided housing	17	8%
Travels to work with persons outside the household	121	58%

**The definition of an overcrowded household follows the U.S. Census definition which is a ratio of greater than one for the ratio of persons per room (excluding bathrooms and garages).* (16)

Table 4.3. Health care utilization and trusted sources of health information

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage of participants
Used health care services in the U.S. during the pandemic	44	21%
Sources of health care services among those who utilized health care in the U.S.		
Clinic	6	14%
Hospital/emergency room	18	41%
Private doctor	4	9%
Other (pharmacy, Community/Migrant Health Center)	16	36%
Sources of trusted information for serious health issues		
Doctor/nurse	131	63%
Social media	54	26%
Relative	43	21%
Employer	1	<1%
Church/school	9	4%
Community health worker	15	7%
Other	25	12%

COVID-19 SAFETY INFORMATION, ILLNESS, TESTING, AND VACCINATION

Approximately one in four respondents (26%) reported that they had not received a comprehensive COVID-19 safety training at work in their preferred language that included information about 1) hand-washing, 2) mask usage, 3) physical distancing, and 4) quarantine/isolation. Eighty-six percent indicated that they had received training on at least one of those topics, but only 74% reported receiving a training on all four topics in their preferred language at work (see Table 4.4). Respondents were also asked where else they had received training or instruction on preventing COVID-19, either in the U.S. or in their home country. Television was the most common source of training or instruction (53%), followed by health care providers (26%), and radio (22%) and social media (22%).

Table 4.4: COVID-19 safety training and instruction

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage of participants
Workplace COVID safety training received*		
Received training in at least one topic	178	86%
Received training in all four topics	163	79%
Received training in all four topics in preferred language	154	74%
Other sources of COVID safety instruction/training		
Radio	46	22%
Social media	46	22%
Television	110	53%
Health care providers	54	26%
Other sources	37	18%

**Topics included 1) hand washing, 2) physical distancing, 3) use of face covering, and 4) quarantine or isolation procedures.*

Sixteen percent of respondents self-reported that they had had COVID-19 at some point in the pandemic (see Table 4.5). Over half of respondents had been tested for COVID-19 (57%), and 31% reported that their current or most recent agricultural employer asked for workers to receive a COVID-19 test. Access to COVID-19 testing was generally not an issue for most respondents at the time the surveys were conducted. The top difficulties with testing included a long wait to get tested (12%) and fear of being infected at the site (9%).

Almost three in four respondents (71%) were fully vaccinated against COVID-19 (see Table 4.5). Sixteen percent of respondents were not vaccinated, but most of those (70%) indicated that they wanted to receive a COVID-19 vaccination, or 11% of the total sample. Only five of the unvaccinated respondents (2%) reported that they did not want to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. The most common reason for not wanting the vaccine was fear of side effects. The most common place that respondents reported receiving a COVID-19 vaccine was at a community event (33%).

Table 4.5. COVID-19 Illness, Testing, and Vaccinations

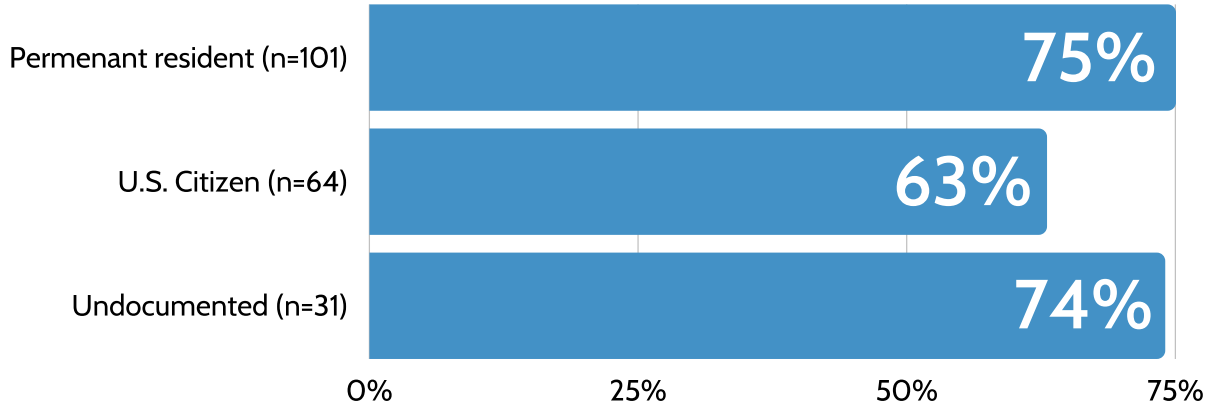
Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage of participants
COVID-19 illness		
Self-reported COVID-19 illness	33	16%
COVID-19 testing		
Had taken COVID-19 test at least once	117	57%
Employer reportedly asked workers to be tested	65	31%
Employer reportedly facilitated or paid for testing	35	17%
COVID-19 vaccinations		
Fully vaccinated*	147	71%
Partially vaccinated	26	13%
Not vaccinated	34	16%
Wants to receive vaccine	23	11%
Undecided about vaccine	5	2%
Does not want vaccine	5	2%

**Fully vaccinated includes respondents who received one dose of the Janssen/Johnson and Johnson vaccine, or two doses of any COVID-19 vaccine approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or the World Health Organization.*

Vaccination status varied by key demographic characteristics, including by race and by immigration status. U.S. citizens had the lowest vaccination coverage percentage of all immigration statuses, with 63% fully vaccinated, compared to 74% of undocumented respondents. Similarly, those born in the United States reported the lowest percentage of completed vaccinations (52%) compared to respondents born in Mexico (77%). White workers had the lowest percentage of fully vaccinated respondents, with 67% of the 91 participants reporting full vaccination status, and the 98 respondents who identified as "other" in the race category had 77% vaccination coverage.

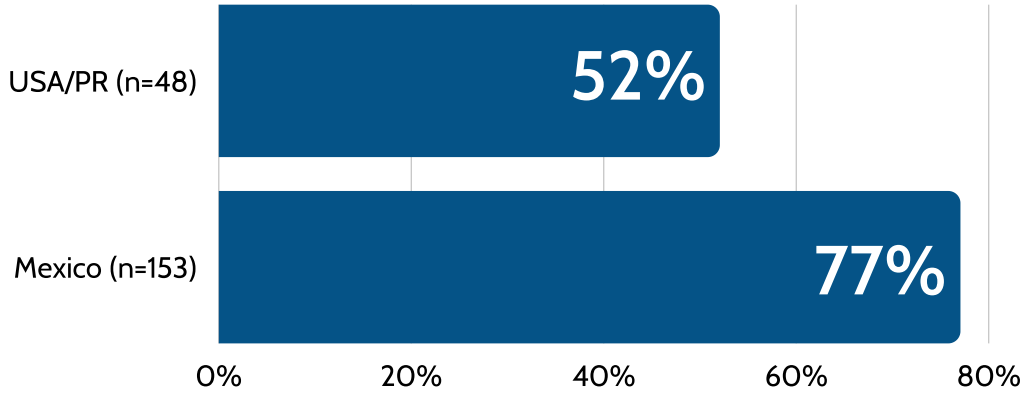
"Fue un cambio drástico porque la gente no quería trabajar, no quería salir, tenia miedo. Entonces con todo lo que paso perdimos muchas personas muy cercanas que murieron. Entonces pues si, si nos afecto en muchos aspectos." // It was a drastic change because people did not want to work, they did not want to go out, they were afraid. With everything that happened we lost many people close to us who died, so it did affect us in many ways.
-Agricultural Employer #1

Figure 4.1. Percent fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by immigration status*



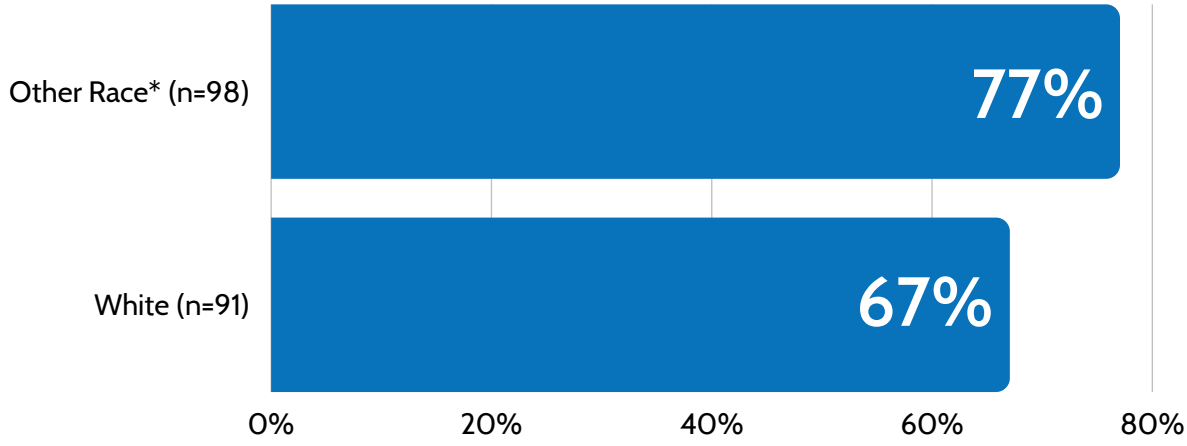
**Other category included respondents who did not answer the question about work authorization status. These data were suppressed due to the small number of respondents.*

Figure 4.2. Percent fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by birth place*



**Other respondents were from Central American countries. These data were suppressed due to the small number of respondents.*

Figure 4.3. Percent fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by self-identified race



**Other category grouped Latinx, Hispanic, Mestizo, and Moreno self -identified respondents.*
Black and Indigenous identified respondents make up the rest of the sample. These data were suppressed due to the small number of respondents.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

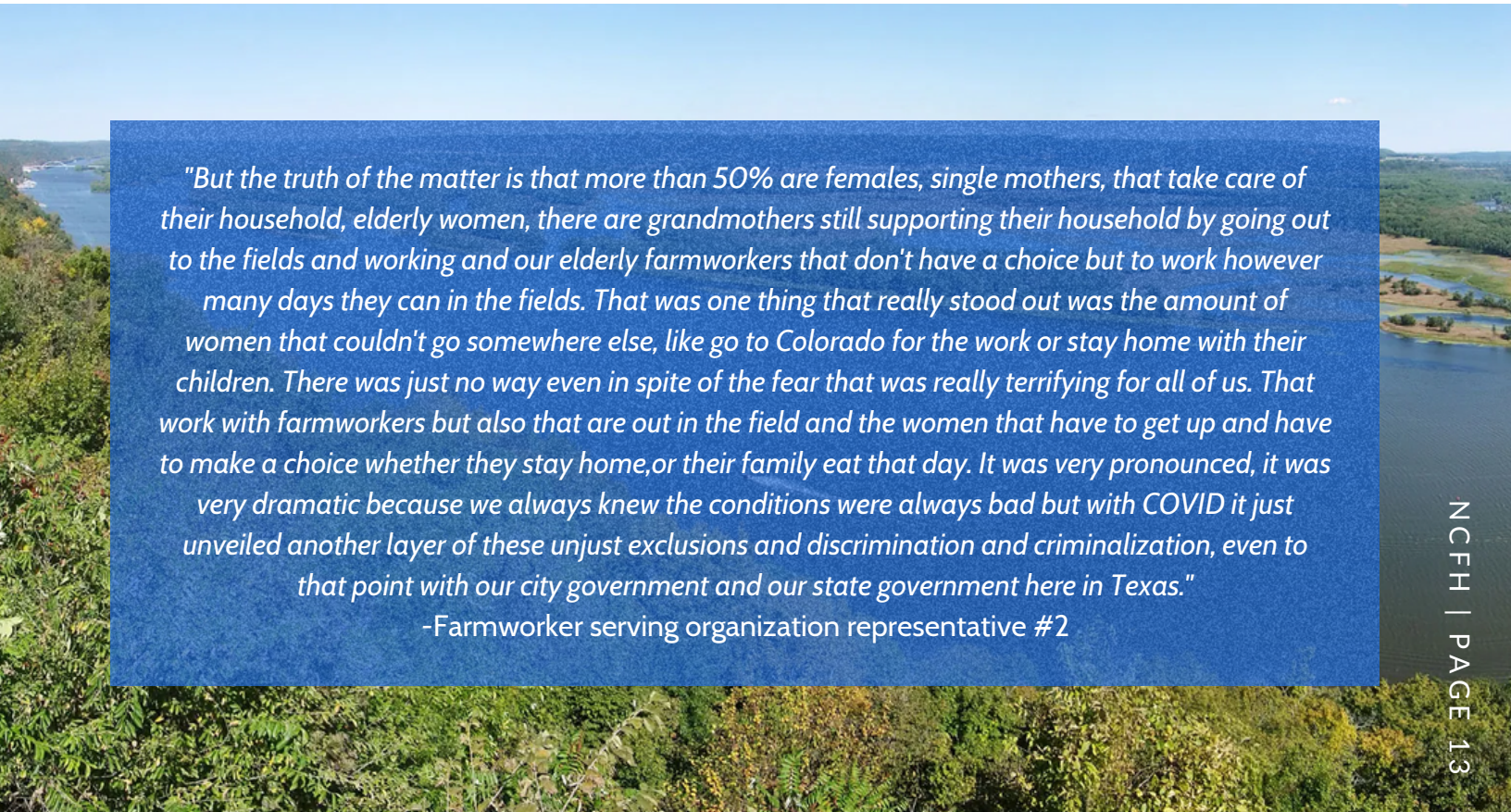
The pandemic has had a significant impact on the employment of respondents: 67% lost work during the pandemic while in the U.S. The majority of respondents (71%) received U.S. governmental assistance of some kind during the pandemic (see Table 4.6). The most common type of assistance received was a stimulus check from the government (61%), followed by food assistance (30%). Only 11% of all respondents received unemployment assistance.

Table 4.6: Impact of COVID-19 on Employment and Income

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage of participants
Lost work in U.S. during pandemic	138	67%
Top three reasons for losing work during pandemic*		
Due to other reasons	51	25%
Due to decline in demand	37	18%
Due to outbreaks in the workplace	29	14%
Received U.S. government assistance during pandemic**	147	71%
	126	61%
Economic stimulus payment	62	30%
Food assistance	2	1%
Rent assistance	22	11%
Unemployment assistance	7	3%
Other		

**Includes the most frequently cited reasons for losing work during the pandemic. Respondents could indicate more than one reason for losing work.*

***Respondents could report receiving more than one type of assistance.*



"But the truth of the matter is that more than 50% are females, single mothers, that take care of their household, elderly women, there are grandmothers still supporting their household by going out to the fields and working and our elderly farmworkers that don't have a choice but to work however many days they can in the fields. That was one thing that really stood out was the amount of women that couldn't go somewhere else, like go to Colorado for the work or stay home with their children. There was just no way even in spite of the fear that was really terrifying for all of us. That work with farmworkers but also that are out in the field and the women that have to get up and have to make a choice whether they stay home,or their family eat that day. It was very pronounced, it was very dramatic because we always knew the conditions were always bad but with COVID it just unveiled another layer of these unjust exclusions and discrimination and criminalization, even to that point with our city government and our state government here in Texas."

-Farmworker serving organization representative #2

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

LIMITATIONS

This assessment had limitations. All survey data are self-reported and only represent a brief snapshot in time. Survey respondents were not randomly sampled so there is a possibility of selection bias. Survey respondents should not necessarily be viewed as a representative sample of all farmworkers in both counties, but rather as a diverse non-random sample to capture information from the different populations of farmworkers in these counties.

DISCUSSION

Both the qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys indicate that both farmworkers and employers were greatly affected by the pandemic. Overall, 71% of participants were fully vaccinated against COVID-19, a figure that is lower than the October 2021 rates in Doña Ana County (80%, age 18+) and El Paso County (84%, age 18+).(17) A very small proportion of participants (2%) disclosed that they did not want to receive the vaccine, suggesting vaccine hesitancy does not appear to be a critical issue among farmworkers in this area. Data show that these essential workers in El Paso and Doña Ana Counties are generally not hesitant to get vaccinated and will take advantage of accessible vaccination and testing if available. Organizations working to support farmworkers in the area and other stakeholders in farmworker health could benefit from additional public health resources to continue vaccination of farmworkers in the area, particularly among U.S.-born workers who reported lower vaccination coverage.

Transportation and housing were both risk factors for COVID-19 transmission, and transportation was a barrier to accessing health care documented by both surveys and interviews. More than half (58%) of farmworkers traveled to work with people outside of their household, and more than one in four (27%) respondents lived in overcrowded housing, increasing risk of COVID-19 transmission. As essential workers, farmworkers continually face COVID-19 exposure at home, going to work, and at work, and overcrowded housing means it is difficult to quarantine or isolate away from other household members, increasing the spread of the virus. Increased resources and support for better housing options for farmworkers long-term would help to decrease COVID-19 transmission among farmworkers, improve well-being, and help ensure that farmworkers are better equipped to prevent and mitigate a future disease outbreak.

Disclaimer: This publication was supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling $4,000,000 with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

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