The invisibility of farmworkers: Implications and remedies

Kennedy Saldanha¹

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Abstract

This article highlights the invisibility of farmworkers in Michigan, a state dependent on migrant labor for more than one hundred years. The study describes migrant housing camps using data from fieldwork, visits to housing camps, and the shadowing of outreach staff from service organizations. Although regulated, accommodations are minimal, substandard, and overcrowded, affecting the health and well-being of workers. The study describes what farmworkers do in their scant evening hours, the vulnerability of H-2A guest workers, the meticulousness accompanying outreach, and how farmworkers are visible to outreach staff. The study concludes by highlighting how farmworkers are just as invisible as are their housing camps, their contributions to the food movement, and their erasure from historic tales and promotional materials in local tourist towns, which stress the contributions of only some groups. The article underscores the value of outreach, the outstanding work performed by outreach staff, and avenues for increasing the visibility and advocacy on behalf of farmworkers.

Keywords Farmworkers · Outreach · Invisibility · Migrant labor camps · Food movements · Guest workers · Structural violence

La invisibilidad de los trabajadores agrícolas: Implicaciones y remedios

Resumen

Este artículo resalta la invisibilidad de los trabajadores agrícolas en Michigan, un estado que hace más de cien años depende de la mano de obra migrante. El estudio describe los campamentos de vivienda para inmigrantes usando los datos obtenidos del trabajo de campo, las visitas a los campamentos y el acompañamiento al personal de alcance comunitario de organizaciones que ofrecen servicios. Aunque regulada, la vivienda consta de unidades mínimas, de calidad inferior y propensas al hacinami-

✉ Kennedy Saldanha
ksaldanh@emich.edu

¹ Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI, USA

ento, lo que afecta la salud y el bienestar de los trabajadores. El estudio describe lo que suelen hacer los trabajadores agrícolas durante sus pocas horas libres de la tarde, la vulnerabilidad de los trabajadores invitados con visas H-2A, la minuciosidad que caracteriza el alcance comunitario y cómo los trabajadores agrícolas son visibles para el personal de alcance. El estudio concluye resaltando que los trabajadores agrícolas son tan visibles como lo son sus campamentos de vivienda, sus aportaciones al movimiento alimentario y su exclusión de los relatos históricos y de los materiales publicitarios en los pueblos turísticos locales, que solo acentúan las aportaciones de ciertos grupos. El artículo subraya el valor del alcance comunitario, el trabajo excepcional que desempeña el personal de alcance y las vías para aumentar la visibilidad y la defensa de los trabajadores agrícolas.

Palabras clave Trabajadores agrícolas · Alcance comunitario · Invisibilidad · Campamentos de trabajo de inmigrantes · Movimientos alimentarios · Trabajadores invitados · Violencia estructural

A visit to western Michigan and a housing camp in the region

The first time I entered a farmworker housing camp in Michigan was July 2018. More viscerally than ever before, I felt the violence and contradictions of our transnational agro-food system in the appalling conditions I saw. Despite recent anti-immigrant political discourses, even during travel and work restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the suspensions of visa programs, the US still allowed entry of foreign agricultural guest workers, as North American food production is dependent on migrant labor (Xiuhtecutli and Shattuck 2021).

My 2018 view of the camp was a follow-up to a visit I had made to the Saugatuck-Douglas area in western Michigan in 2017. Since first arriving in the United States in 2011, I have been seeking to learn the lay of the land, and I have instituted a practice of traveling every summer. Many of my colleagues had recommended I visit western Michigan, in particular the Saugatuck-Douglas area. The area is spectacular because of its proximity to Lake Michigan, the Kalamazoo River, and many picturesque small towns. Locals, tourist literature, and Instagram highlight natural beauty, dunes, Lake Michigan's sandy beaches, arts, festivals, shopping, charming places to stay, restaurants, and food "fresh from farm to table." But they never picture farmworkers.

When I visited the twin towns of Saugatuck and Douglas that make up the area and are popular tourist destinations, locals were quick to detail the unique history of the area. They offered examples to explain how the towns grew from the outside. I learned of a group of artists from the Art Institute of Chicago who rebelled against the traditional practice of in-studio painting and had relocated to the area in 1905. Following them, many city artists arrived every summer and began to organize several art schools, often outdoors on the banks of the Kalamazoo or shores of Lake Michigan (Lane 1997). In the 1920s, Florence Dannie Hunn, an interior designer and aspiring Chicago architect, was not admitted to the architecture school of

Chicago because she was a woman, but the community in the Saugatuck-Pier Cove area welcomed her and gave her the opportunity to practice architecture and landscaping (Saugatuck-Douglas History Center 2000). Since the 1950s, LGBTQ and biker communities have thrived in the area. I was enthralled to hear such rich and captivating illustrations of how outsiders became insiders, and these stories seemed to welcome me as well.

Yet none of the locals mentioned the farmworkers who were also in the area. They were literally and figuratively invisible—their presence and contributions absent in historical narratives, tourist tales, promotional materials, and “farm to table” exhortations. The host of the home where I stayed was the only exception. Of Colombian heritage, my host mentioned the presence of a farmworker community and, at the end of the summer, invited me to a fiesta organized by the Catholic diocese of Kalamazoo in the town of Hartford in Van Buren County. At this event I encountered the farmworker community for the first time. The following summer, I decided to revisit the area, about 150 miles from where I live, to learn about farmworkers.

This article presents my experiences as a tourist, newcomer, and junior social work professor and scholar as a starting point to reflect on how, in some areas popular with tourists, groups whose labor has contributed to the success of the local economies are taken for granted and rendered invisible, as are their contributions to us as food consumers. I aim to prompt readers to consider, and act on their answers to, questions such as these: Are those who produce our food visible or invisible to us? How might farmworkers and their working and living conditions become more visible in society? How might this visibility be further extended to increase our awareness of their contributions in small local towns and the food movement? Which groups know and visit farmworkers, and what does outreach to provide services look like? Are agricultural issues at the local and state level reflective of more systemic issues about American agriculture?

The aim of this article is not to criticize the representations that local commerce bureaus market to tourists, but rather to spotlight the society in which they exist that makes the erasures in those representations rational, even necessary. It is a provocation via structural theory (Farmer 2004) to highlight our responsibility to farmworkers, who are integral to our transnational agro-food system bringing food from “farm to table” in many local areas, while continuing to live and work in the conditions this article describes, increasing their vulnerability to isolation, and poor health and well-being. The article begins with the methods and literature reviewed, and then describes migrant labor camps, outreach, and the environmental and social context of living in congregate housing. It concludes with a discussion of some perspectives related to the invisibility of farmworkers.

How I went about the study

The data presented, using fieldwork methods (Blommaert and Dong 2010) at migrant housing camps in western Michigan, illuminates the conditions typical in camps in many parts of this country, a subset of the deplorable housing condition all farmworkers experience, even those not accommodated in camps (Arcury

et al. 2015; Bacon 2017). Across three growing seasons, two conducting fieldwork (2018 and 2019), I visited approximately thirty different camps in Allegan and Van Buren Counties in western Michigan, some on multiple occasions. Staff from service organizations conducting or participating in informal outreach, semi-organized camp events, and community fiestas provided entry into these camps—vital pathways because the area was new to me, the camps are often hidden from the road, and I initially did not speak Spanish. While conducting fieldwork I collected observation fieldnotes and had conversations with farmworkers and outreach staff. I also volunteered at two off-camp migrant summer schools, one each season. Additionally, I toured the local towns and, in the fall, winter, and spring between and following the fieldwork, I participated in monthly Michigan Interagency Migrant Services Committee (IMSC) meetings, and some trainings and preparations for the next season provided by the IMSC and outreach organizations I had shadowed.

In the third growing season (2020), because of COVID-19-related lockdown orders, I did not visit the area in person, but participated in IMSC virtual meetings and trainings and had the opportunity to see how these organizations continued to reach out to farmworkers and growers and network with each other. I learned about how some service providers educated farmworkers regarding CDC recommendations, used no-contact methods to deliver food kits and flyers, helped growers test workers, advocated for wages and for locations where farmworkers testing positive could quarantine, and creatively used WhatsApp, social media, and the radio to reach out to farmworkers.

If qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, fieldnotes are accounts and representations of that world. I include fieldnotes to describe my engagement as a “participant-observer” and to craft a picture of the hidden location of migrant housing, camp conditions, the context of outreach, the complexities staff face when engaging directly with farmworkers, and as a basis for introducing key issues discussed throughout the article. In a limited way, they are a substitute for participant narratives. This study received IRB approval from Eastern Michigan University.

A summary of farmworkers from the literature

Estimates suggest there are over three million migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States today (National Center for Farmworker Health 2018), but this may be an underestimation, as migrant farmworkers move and are often known to intentionally maneuver through hidden spaces. The National Agricultural Workers Survey indicates that 73% of agricultural workers surveyed are immigrants (US Department of Labor 2018), and around half of farmworkers do not have legal documentation to work in the United States (Holmes 2013). Researchers estimate there are at least one million indigenous farmworkers (Holmes 2020). The average farmworker earns between \$10,000 and \$12,499 per year (Wald 2016a) and a third of them live in households in which the combined income falls below federal poverty lines (US Department of Labor 2018). Studies place

farmworker food insecurity rates between 45 and 55% (Allen 2004; Brown and Getz 2011; Liu and Apollon 2011).

Farmworkers face deplorable working conditions. They lack regular access to restrooms or drinking water on the job, and women workers routinely face sexual harassment and assault (Allen 2004; Cediel 2013; Khokha 2014). Annually, 300,000 farmworkers suffer from pesticide poisoning (Liu and Apollon 2011; Hansen and Donohoe 2003), yet less than 10% have health insurance (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). Although statistics on child labor in this field are hard to come by, US federal law permits children as young as twelve to work in the fields (Center for Public Integrity 2019; Hansen and Donohoe 2003). The threat of deportation makes farmworkers vulnerable on multiple fronts (Bacon 2008; Villagrán 2019; Wald 2016a).

Housing for agricultural workers is substandard and in short supply. The most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey (2015–2016) reported that 54% rented their homes and 16% lived in employer-provided housing. Studies of migrant housing camps report crowded or extremely crowded conditions (Arcury and Quandt 2020; Quandt et al. 2015; Villarejo 2011, 2014), structural deficiencies (Quandt et al. 2015), housing regulation violations (Arcury et al. 2012; Quandt et al. 2015), pest infestation (Arcury et al. 2012; Bradman et al. 2005), and exposure to agricultural chemicals (Bradman et al. 2007; Lu et al. 2000). However, most of these studies were conducted in North Carolina or California; studies that address other issues related to farmworkers generally have taken place in western and southern states, with Florida, Texas, North Carolina, and California being well represented (Quandt et al. 2015). Thus, we know little about key issues affecting farmworkers in other states. Researchers also emphasize that studies using primary data on farmworkers' housing more recent than 2010 are scant, as most studies rely on earlier data (Arcury and Quandt 2020).

The dependence of Michigan's agricultural industry on migrant labor streams over time

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the sugar beet industry came to rural Michigan, transforming agriculture, the flows of labor migration, immigration, and the entire midwestern region (Mapes 2009). By introducing large factories and contract farming, it not only remade community, class, and race relations, but required the building of a system of family-based migratory labor to supply the needs of an exceptionally labor-intensive crop. Initially farmers used the nation's newest migrant laborers, Eastern European ethnics, including women and children, until they “settled out” from the beet fields, creating a vacuum in the rural Michigan workforce (Badillo 2003). Key turning points in labor patterns emerged during World War I and World War II, caused by labor shortages. World War I replaced previous Eastern European farm laborers with Mexicans, essentially changing Michigan's rural labor patterns (Mapes 2009). For some Mexicans the sugar beet fields were also an avenue of geographic, social, and economic mobility, and they found their way to year-round industrial jobs in Chicago and Detroit,

although many returned to the beet fields whenever they lost those jobs (Badillo 2003). There also emerged an expanded role for corporations to supply and determine the nature of not just national labor but even transnational labor. World War II and the accompanying labor shortages brought with it a new farmworker, the temporary guest worker (Villagrán 2019). Under a binational agreement, tens of thousands of laborers from Mexico were recruited to work on US farms under what came to be known as the Bracero Program (Galarza 1964). Michigan and the rest of the Midwest took in braceros, as well as other regionally and ethnically varied groups of workers (Valdés 1991). From 1918, the sugar beet industry looked to Mexico and recruited thousands of Mexicans to work in the beet fields of Michigan and Ohio (Valdés 1991). Later, sugar beet companies began contracting with South Texas farmers to essentially borrow their workforce to work in Michigan seasonally (Badillo 2003; Valdés 1988, 1991) thus giving rise to the annual spring exodus of migrant farmworker streams (Villagrán 2019). The face of the American farmworker was thus transformed into a brown, Spanish-speaking one, and agricultural labor was transformed into a foreign labor market. Countless instances of abuse, violence, poor treatment, alienation, wage theft, and unsafe work environments (Galarza 1964; Valdés 1991) led to the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964.

Although migrant farmworker streams have continued, they have changed with time. Three streams that have emerged are the Western stream, the Midwest stream, and the Eastern stream (Villagrán 2019). Undocumented workers are a critical part of all three streams, although legal residents and US citizens also take part (Griffith and Kissam 1995). The Midwest stream is composed of workers from South Texas who migrate through various parts of the US Midwest, with Michigan being the most prominent landing spot (Villagrán 2019). Because local labor supply has never been adequate to keep up with the demands of farmers for cheap and seasonal labor, they gradually began looking not just to Texas but, increasingly, to Florida for help.

Michigan is the nation's fifth largest user of transient migrant and seasonal farmworkers (USDOL 2013). Approximately 160,000 people enter the state each agricultural season (Michigan State Bar Foundation 1999). They benefit the economy by spending 50% to 75% of their wages locally (Rosenbaum 2002). The various federal and state programs established since the 1960s to provide services and address the problems of migrant farmworkers also benefit local economies by creating employment positions. As well, some farmworkers have put down roots in western Michigan, becoming actively involved in civic and social matters (Coronado 2018; Fernández 2013).

The advancement in technology for beet farming has reduced the numbers of required laborers, but high-density plantings of specialized crops in the 1940s (in western Michigan), such as blueberries, apples, and cherries emerged, and necessitated a rather large manual labor force (Villagrán 2019). Simultaneously, some migrant and seasonal farmworkers from South Texas, who travel mainly as families, began choosing to work in the corn-belt states of Illinois, Nebraska, and Iowa, forcing Michigan's farmers to look for other cheap and seasonal labor sources. Thus, the state began using Florida's young, single male workers, who migrate in larger crews than Texas families (Villagrán 2019). They also began to recruit guest workers, who

are foreign workers brought here by labor contractors on H-2A group work visas and who must return to their country of origin each year. H-2A labor is steeply rising across the country (Bauer and Stewart 2013; Wozniacka 2019), and in Michigan the state government is increasingly involved in facilitating the expansion of the program (Villagrán 2019). In 2018, there were 242,000 visa issuances, of which Michigan was within the top ten states and received 3.4% of the workers (US Office of Foreign Labor Certification 2018). Using H-2A workers who are foreign and single is another way Michigan's farmers and farm interests maintain a farm labor class that is seasonal and subjugated. Whereas family farmworkers may need time to take their child to the doctor, attend a parent conference in school, or visit a sick grandmother in Mexico, this new kind of H-2A worker is available at all times and will not complain about long working hours (Villagrán 2019).

Although sources of migrant labor and migrant streams have changed, the working and living conditions of farmworkers remain very poor. Through the years, some active national organizing efforts for farmworker justice have developed, such as the United Farm Workers of California and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Ohio and North Carolina, as well as groups like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida. The CIW publicly addresses food justice through its Fair Food Program, representing a coalition of workers, participating growers, and participating buyers, in which large buyers agree to pay more for their purchase in order for that money to reach farmworkers and improve their wages and working conditions (Coalition of Immokalee Workers 2018).

Apart from the gap in our knowledge of the conditions agricultural workers face in Michigan, scant research has addressed outreach to farmworkers. This article adds to the literature on farmworkers in Michigan, highlighting their enduring invisibility and their housing and living conditions, and detailing how the services rendered directly to camps by outreach workers function on the ground and the extent to which farmworkers and their living conditions are visible to service providers.

The study also addresses a major shortcoming of the contemporary food movement. As authors like political scientist Margaret Gray (2013) and professor of environmental studies and English Sarah Wald (2011, 2016b) point out, a focus on consumption at the expense of a narrative about production has contributed to immigrants' invisibility in the movement. Even food advocates and food movement gurus who weave contemporary narratives of the ills of industrial farming and the ecological and political importance of food do not address the needs and preferences of farmworkers. Using the artisanal Hudson Valley agricultural region as a case study, Gray (2013) argues that rosy assumptions about the benefits of local food and agriculture create an incomplete picture, because the long-standing and ethically problematic role of labor within so much of "local" agriculture remains out of view.

Labor camps and outreach to them

Visits to and descriptions of labor camps

From the beginning of my research in the Saugatuck-Douglas area, I had been eager to visit a housing camp. The first opportunity came in the middle of July, attending a parent-teacher meeting called Reunion de Padres. An excerpt of my field notes captures how I faltered to find the location:

18th July 2018: I'm driving south on Blue Star Highway to an event called "Reunion de Padres," to begin at 6 pm. I meticulously follow directions I've been given and make a left turn, off the paved road, a quarter mile past the Shell gas station on the southern end of the town. But now I don't see any signs of life. I am uncertain if I'm driving beside a farm or right through it, as besides the rows and rows of blueberry bushes there is nothing else along the unpaved dusty road to indicate it is used. Did I misunderstand the directions? Am I going to the right place? Suddenly, the road takes a sharp right turn, and I am pleasantly surprised to come upon some white tents in a cleared area in the middle of the fields and realize they had been set up for the event.

I drive past the tents and park at the far end. Exiting my car, I take in my surroundings. To my right are verdant blueberry bushes extending as far as my eye can see. To my left, there are three trailers where workers stay. In front of me are three tents: one large tent for parents and others associated with the event to gather, and two smaller tents for food preparations, including a large portable grill where hot dogs were already cooking. Additionally, in a single row, four white folding banquet tables, about six feet long, have been set up. They have banners, brochures, books and trinkets and are staffed by some organizations. Because there isn't enough space to fit all the tables, a few feet away, between two rows of blueberry bushes, in an opening wide enough for a tractor to drive through, is another portable banquet table. It has all sorts of materials for face painting.

I was concerned at first that I had completely lost my way, because although I had offered to drive myself to the event, I had not expected that camps are so hidden and therefore difficult to locate. The camp where the event took place was the equivalent of three city blocks away from the main road and actually within the fields. Two-thirds of the camps I visited were located at least 0.15 miles from a publicly maintained all-weather road. Those that were closer were often obscured from nearby roads by a natural or manufactured structure, such as a farm building or tall granary.

Although migrant camps can differ, with varying types of structures and number of dwellings of each type, and are therefore difficult to define or describe to someone, most of those I saw consisted typically of a cluster of ten to twenty trailers or cabins set up adjacent to work fields as accommodations for farm laborers, although some consisted of only two to four. A trailer is typically subdivided into individual housing units. Workers without accompanying family, usually called "solos," almost all of whom were men, generally slept in units lined with four to six bunkbeds.

Families typically occupied trailers: some had their own units and others shared with one other family. While most units are single rooms, some are subdivided into a kitchen, living room, and bedroom.

Besides trailers, camps have shacks or cabins, which are freestanding single-room structures. These, too, had bunk beds and basic kitchen equipment, generally an electric stove, a refrigerator, and a sink and faucet. Although tiny, cabins might accommodate eight to twelve single workers or an entire family. Some camps had dormitory-style accommodations—barrack-like structures or farmhouses, each accommodating twenty or more workers. Most camps I visited had either trailers or a combination of trailers, cabins, and barracks.

Virtually all the accommodations I visited offered the bare minimum and were substandard, unsanitary, and overcrowded. Their exteriors varied—a few were recently painted, but most were weathered and dilapidated. They were poorly insulated and ventilated, with sheets and cardboard in windows for privacy and to keep out the light or sun. Some units had box fans propping windows open; only a few had window air-conditioning units. The four to six steps leading up to the entry door were frequently unsteady, made of stacked recycled wood pallets nailed together. In addition to central sanitary facilities, extra portable toilets were available; however, these facilities were manifestly inadequate for the number of users. Laundering facilities were mostly long sinks with three to four taps. Other issues included torn window screens, broken doors, leaking faucets, broken showers, and bedbugs.

Camps are regulated at federal and state levels. Like a few other states, Michigan requires camps to be licensed and certified. Certificates must be prominently displayed on a bulletin board or on the front door of each unit, indicating it was inspected and approved for a certain number of occupants. Standards and regulations are minimal, and their enforcement success varies greatly (Arcury and Quandt 2020; Joyner et al. 2015). During fieldwork I learned from outreach staff that post-occupancy housing inspections seldom take place, although complaints sometimes spur them. According to the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting (2016), the oversight of migrant housing is a fractured and ineffective system, dependent on the services of a low number of housing inspectors, with regulations and the agencies responsible for inspection varying from state to state. Missouri, for example, requires inspections for housing for H-2A foreign workers, but inspections are voluntary for employers hiring other US migrant workers (Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting 2016).

Michigan upholds the right of free access to camps by outreach workers from service organizations and guests of migrant laborers (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2010). State law bars property owners from requiring staff from community agencies to sign in or notify them when visiting camps. However, on more than one occasion when I entered with outreach workers we were stopped, sometimes even required to state the purpose of our visit. For these occasions, outreach workers carry “right to access” flyers clarifying they have the right to enter camps. There

was no way to stop crew leaders or supervisors from monitoring outreach visits by hanging around nearby in a pickup truck or conducting follow-up conversations with workers.

Types of outreach

The Reunion de Padres was just one of many semi-organized events a team of staff and volunteers from one of the school districts conducted during my fieldwork. Every week the team visited a different camp, including camps where students went to other school districts. Staff from government and nonprofit service providers participated in these events and staffed tables with information about their services. Such events lasted for two to three hours and might include speeches, informal activities such as games for the children, and a meal. Events were promoted to parents and farm owners. During my second season of fieldwork, such semi-organized events were suspended after the first few events, since US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was active in the area, and gathering farmworker families together might put them at risk. It is interesting that ICE, which generally knows where workers can be found, sometimes selectively enforces immigration policy to suit labor needs of growers, such as avoiding apprehensions or waiting until late in the agricultural season to check farmer workforce documentation (Menchaca 2016).

Migrant health centers conducted another type of outreach—health clinics. Such clinics involved a mobile medical van accompanied by a doctor, nurse, and receptionist. At larger camps a team of health professionals, including community health workers and medical student interns, also participated.

An additional type of outreach consisted of informal visits to camps by staff from the different organizations. This was the kind of outreach I directly observed, riding along with staff on their visits. Faith groups are also known to conduct outreach. Kanter (2021) documents the origins of this tradition in 1953, in which Mexican priests were invited to Michigan to serve braceros and migrant families. I often encountered a group of four Latinx¹ nuns and a priest. These five were visitors brought to the US to conduct summer ministry at the camps, where they offered evening devotions, mass, and house visits on behalf of the diocese of Kalamazoo.

Informal outreach

Outreach to farmworkers is part of the mandate of most service and advocacy organizations, some of whom I shadowed. In general, the purpose of outreach is to inform farmworkers of their rights and resources, gather information about their working and living conditions, and make referrals for services. Because farmworkers work all day and live at a distance from the organizations, outreach is a crucial part of service delivery, and conducted informally.

¹ Latinx is a gender-neutral inclusive American English neologism used to refer to people of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity in the US instead of the typical grammatical gender endings used in Spanish.

When conducting outreach, timing is critical. We would generally begin between 6:30 and 7:00 p.m. In addition to bringing outreach to the camps at the right time, this timing allowed me to observe the transformation of the camps as workers returned from the fields and began to hustle to attend to chores such as cooking, bathing, and laundry. While parents immediately tended to their children, many solos hastened to call home on their cellphones. Others, mostly men, gathered in groups around picnic tables to relax, chat, and sometimes play cards. At this time of the day the interior of their dwelling, soaked in the heat, would be uncomfortably sultry. The outreach workers I shadowed conversed with workers who were outside. We also knocked on doors; if someone answered, we spoke with them briefly and offered informational brochures and handouts. This door knocking gave me glimpses of sparse furniture and well-used stoves, fridges, and cookware. Unless invited, we never entered workers' living space, and even then, never stayed very long. Sometimes, we observed small groups drinking beer—perhaps to relax, bond, and pass time since there was nothing else to do, or to forget pain and problems and cope with isolation (Ramos et al. 2019; Villagrán 2019). Although alcohol abuse and dependence are issues among Latinx farmworkers (Arcury et al. 2016; Ramos et al. 2019), some studies find that farmworkers also tend to have higher overall alcohol abstinence rates than Latinx migrant workers performing other kinds of work (Ramos et al. 2019).

Sometimes workers, especially those with families, might come from a neighboring camp to celebrate birthdays or participate in religious services, thereby reinforcing ethnic and religious ties. Some employers offered workers transportation to the local store in the evenings. However, workers stated that transportation for needed purchases was a major challenge, particularly for H-2A workers. H-2A workers do not have their own transportation. Most camps are far from any store, such as mini-marts and convenience stores, and very far from supermarkets and discount stores like Walmart. Some workers wouldn't return until 8:30, yet the camps started to quiet around 9:00. By 10:00 p.m. most lights would be turned off and a silence would descend throughout the camp.

I learned that outreach staff vary their communication styles with individuals and groups to quickly convey the most essential information yet develop enough rapport to make individuals feel comfortable enough to return if they need additional assistance. Outreach workers are cognizant of who they might encounter at camps, especially farm supervisors and labor contractors, who are intermediaries that recruit, transport, house, supervise, and pay workers. They are Latinxs. I heard from outreach staff of many examples of the degrading treatment and abuses of power from labor contractors and crew leaders toward workers. When labor contractors were around, workers, particularly H-2A workers, were guarded and reticent in their interactions.

Most of the staff I shadowed belonged to an agency whose outreach strategy was to begin by distributing a bilingual calendar. The calendar was an ideal conversation starter thanks to its inclusion of information about various agencies and their services. Each month had some information about regulations governing immigration, employment rights, wages, taxes, and other matters pertinent to farmworkers. Outreach staff are knowledgeable about community resources for public health,

daycare, legal assistance, and religious services. Most of the farmworkers know little about the area, services, and laws or regulations in Michigan, so the information was highly valuable. Outreach staff and interns sometimes acted as intermediaries, by bringing legal documents by which workers could engage attorneys to take action to protect their wages, health, and safety rights. Professionals such as attorneys do not have the flexibility to work around the availability and locations of farmworkers, so outreach staff and interns act as agents and brokers for their organizations.

The meticulousness of outreach and treatment of workers

Accompanying staff and interns of three agencies on a regular basis, I learned there are many nuances and a meticulousness associated with mundane tasks, including making observations and notes. Staff, most of them seasonal staff, performed these tasks meticulously. Social location and a combination of which agency the staff belonged to and whether they were seasonal or full-time played a role in outreach. For example, one evening, visiting some camps that I'd never been to before with two interns I had never met before, I made the following notes:

I am seated in the back of an older model Sonata. To my left are two cardboard boxes with calendars and promotional materials, organized neatly in separate piles. Two interns occupy the front seats. It is clear they have planned this trip carefully as they have water, sunscreen, an itinerary, addresses, and printed maps. Both are fluent in Spanish although it is not their native language.

I scribble details about outreach at this agency [based on their answers to my questions]: generally once a week; 4–6 camps on each trip; interns are not expected to begin outreach until they have spent about 2–3 weeks at the agency, by which time they have learned about laws and regulations affecting farmworkers; completion of a three-day intensive training prior to beginning outreach; always go in pairs; and, wear identity badges and agency uniform for all visits. We have now turned off the main road, made two quick left turns parking parallel to a white pickup truck—the only vehicle at the first camp. As we disembark, the driver concludes, “Actually interns benefit more from outreach than the agency itself” indicating it offers them great training about camps, farmworkers, other farm employees, laws, and engagement and other professional skills.

The first camp we visit has between 50 and 60 guest workers who have recently arrived in three or four batches. The crew leader interrupts whatever tasks they are engaged in and summons them into a single group. The interns introduce themselves, distribute calendars, and list the services offered by their agency. The workers do not ask any questions following the presentation. It seems some of them want to get back to a game of soccer that was interrupted when we arrived. Or perhaps they do not wish to ask questions in the presence of their crew leader.

I am taken aback at the end of the visit to the final camp. Things proceeded as they generally do. We speak to groups of workers hanging out together and then divide ourselves to knock on doors and distribute calendars. One of the interns discreetly meets with a worker to have some papers signed as even though camps are communal, outreach staff must be extremely careful not to let out who might have contacted an agency and to what purpose. But, while we were about to leave, a group of workers invites us into their trailer. It's a small space and extremely hot despite a pedestal fan circulating the air. There are eight male workers chatting with us. Three squeeze themselves on a worn-out couch; the rest stand. The only other furnishings are a refrigerator and stove on which some chicken is cooking. The entire place is infested with flies. Workers fan themselves with hand fans and cardboard squares to cool themselves and ward off the flies. The flies are swarming over the frying pan too in which some chicken is cooking. Although we do not stay long, it is somewhat obvious the workers invited us in to make a point about the inadequacy of their accommodations.

We visit six camps this evening. Locating them is difficult and entering one of them proved challenging. The farm has a store at the entrance, selling produce, plants, and flowers. We need to visit a lone trailer located further back. The access road is beyond the store and a locked gate. The store employee refuses to open the gate until one of the interns mentions the law says that farmworkers are permitted visitors. The employee then reluctantly opens the gate but makes sure to mention that it is closing time and we have to be quick so she can lock the gate. We make the decision to leave our vehicles in the store's parking lot and walk to the unit. It is located about 0.20 miles away.

[At the end of the evening I wrote]

It has been advantageous riding in the back—I can ask questions and take copious notes, somewhat inconspicuously. I am impressed by how my hosts have conducted themselves throughout the evening. I point out their meticulousness. After spending four hours on the outreach trip, we return to where we had carpooled and begun. As we say goodbye, it appears they have additional tasks that they need to take care of. One of them mentions that they need to stop by their office and file a complaint about the housing conditions at the final camp, the one infested with flies. It will be submitted from their agency to the Michigan State Department of Occupational Health and Safety, which inspects housing and investigates complaints of pest infestation, mold, sewage, faulty electrical wiring, unsanitary conditions, etc.

The situation meeting farmworkers on this visit was atypical, but hardly singular. The employee and the intern were White, non-Hispanic females. Although the store employee seemed unwilling to unlock the gate to access the road leading to the migrant worker housing to visit them, after some back and forth exchanges the intern informed the store clerk about the access-to-housing law, and, to pre-empt additional obstacles, mentioned they were not required to sign in. But on other occasions when

I accompanied Latinx staff, such situations turned out differently, especially when White farm employees interacted with them. White male growers and supervisors tended to be impatient with outreach staff, particularly if they were not government agency staff, asking them about the purpose of their visit, sometimes even hanging around nearby when they were visiting workers as if to indirectly monitor them, or intimidate workers so they would not speak with outreach staff. On one occasion, a supervisor even phoned a H-2A worker from the group visiting with us, requesting he return to his chores.

I found an “ethnicity-citizenship hierarchy” (Holmes 2013) operates on farms, in that White American citizens have the best jobs, wages, and power, and then come all the others, including labor contractors and farmworkers with families. Undocumented, indigenous, and guest workers are at the lowest end. Supervisors wield power over labor contractors, who in turn exert power over everyone else, especially guest workers (Bauer and Stewart 2013). I observed instances of how labor contractors constrain the individual agency of workers as demonstrated when the labor contractor interrupted their limited free time and workers were reluctant to ask any questions of the interns in the presence of the labor contractor. I also heard firsthand about the differential treatment experienced by farmworker families versus H-2A workers, which farmworker families themselves mentioned. Farmworker families mentioned H-2A workers are intimidated by constant reminders of their temporary status and their obligation to be grateful to labor contractors for recruiting them for employment in the United States. Gray (2013) offers some examples of “paternalistic mechanisms of labor control” on farms, whereby farmers provide nonmonetary benefits to their workers to make them feel indebted and think of each other as “family,” which allows farmers to rationalize and obscure class disparities between themselves and their workers. Intimidation by contractors, hierarchical stratification in labor hiring, allotting work to only some individuals when it is scarce at the end of the growing season, and relationship patterns in camps affect the overall well-being of farmworkers and their families. Because farmers know it is difficult to find contractors who will guarantee them a stable work force, they are forgiving of their transgressions (Villagrán 2019).

Worker interactions with camp visitors and staff reflected the power of crew leaders and labor contractors. In the presence of crew leaders and labor contractors, they spoke positively about their employment and housing, and were extremely cautious or hardly interacted with outreach staff if these persons were around. When no supervisors or other workers around, I heard individual workers mention poor working conditions, wage theft, and health and housing violations. In general, workers were unwilling to go on record to disclose these complaints to advocacy agency staff, as they were afraid of retaliation (Bauer and Stewart 2013). Their employers could easily send them home or even blacklist them for the next season (Wozniacka 2019). But even if workers were busy, they always welcomed outreach staff politely.

Shadowing both government agencies and nonprofit organizations, I observed that farmworkers were friendlier with staff from the latter. Perhaps the friendliest interactions I observed took place when I shadowed the nuns. Farmworkers were far more likely to disclose personal details about their families with the nuns than with any other group of outreach workers. When I asked one of the nuns I shadowed what

was the biggest takeaway from her first visit to the United States, she said it was how welcoming the workers were to her, saying they would never allow her to stand at the door but were always inviting her into their dwelling. Religious affiliation may not be the only reason for this warmth, as this group also had fluency in Spanish and familiarity with the culture and context of the home states/countries of the workers. Farmworker families, especially those with children or living in multigenerational households, were particularly sensitive to the distinctions between nuns, outreach workers from nonprofits, and those from government agencies. The nuns mentioned that H-2A workers experienced the greatest difficulties, their most pressing issues being loneliness and social isolation.

The environmental and social context of living in camps

The environmental and social context farmworkers and their families must contend with is terrible and rarely highlighted. Although workers did express satisfaction that housing was located close to where they work, they face poor conditions, with no space to unwind; there isn't even enough seating available for everyone to sit, unless they squat on bunk beds. I often heard workers telling outreach staff of the stresses of living communally with eight to twelve strangers they didn't know and having to share insufficient bathrooms. The impact on teenagers, who work in the fields all day, of having no access to privacy, recreation, or opportunities to socialize with those their own age, must be significant. While some school-age children do attend summer migrant education programs, for older students who are working and trying to make up missed academic credits because of their family migrating for summer employment, the lack of access to the internet or quiet spaces for study is challenging (Bazaz 2019).

The health effects were clear. Many workers reported sleeping poorly. Extreme overcrowding can significantly accelerate communicable diseases (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2010). The example of fly infestation I observed when invited into a dwelling, and my own experience of having to constantly use bug spray during outreach visits to ward off mosquitoes as soon as it became dark, indicates there could be roaches, bedbugs, and mold present in housing units, posing a danger to the health of farmworkers and their families. For solos, who are isolated and separated from their families for a great part of the year, the pressures from living in such conditions, together with insufficient down time, and working in a hierarchically structured and racialized workplace, add to their psychological and emotional stress. These stressors from the work, housing and environmental conditions, and living away from their families can have a significant impact over time. And, similar to the housing locations of the *betabeleros* (beet workers) that Mapes (2009) described, which were purposefully designed for them to live out in the fields, isolated from other Mexican families and the surrounding communities, Michigan's farmworkers face alienation and invisibility that can take a toll on an ethnic group that is traditionally community minded. The alienation and social suffering in Michigan agri-culture will likely worsen as farmers turn increasingly to the H-2A guest worker program (Villagrán 2019; Wozniacka 2019).

The lack of recreational facilities also puts workers' well-being and health at risk. The camp where the labor contractor during our visit interrupted the soccer game was the only place with a field for that purpose, and one other had a volleyball court. There was no outdoor children's play equipment. In all my visits, on only a single occasion did I see children playing outside their trailers, and yet there were many more children visible at camps. Otherwise, children were inside their tiny units unless they were participating in outreach events when agencies might conduct games for the children or distribute toys, puzzles, and children's literature. Given that there are many adults at camps, especially single unaccompanied males, parents may be reluctant to leave their children unsupervised. But parents lack time and transportation to take their children to parks or playgrounds in town.

Implications arising from the study

This study alludes to the disconnect inherent in our food production, which does not recognize the important contributions of farmworkers at the local level and beyond. Although agricultural towns, such as those I visited for the current project, largely depend on migrant labor to harvest fruits, vegetables, and horticultural specialties at specific time periods (Gray 2013; Rosenbaum 2002; Villagrán 2019), migrant farmworkers are taken for granted and invisible in "farm to table" tropes. Farmworkers are integral to food production and should be included in food movement initiatives. An arts center in a popular tourist/retirement town I visited during this study had begun a farmers' market as a community hub to promote and invest in local food. The initiative brought together growers, consumers, and food, but not farmworkers. Food movement initiatives must be inclusive of farmworkers at all levels. Local communities benefit from the presence and contributions of migratory farmworkers much as they benefit from tourists (Rosenbaum 2002). Promotional materials such as brochures and billboards should include farmworker images and even the various tourist tales that recount the contributions of other groups must include farmworkers.

Migrant labor is central to North American food production (Barndt 2006; Striffler 2007); given the overall disinterest of the US population in performing manual agricultural labor, it will remain so for the foreseeable future. If cheap food is an indispensable pillar of the modern economy (Pollan 2010), foreign-born farmworkers, many of them undocumented, make cheap and fresh food possible (Sbicca 2018; Wald 2011, 2016a; Valdés 1991). Yet critical examinations of food production do not—much like promotional materials—acknowledge their role. Furthermore, in small towns, organic farming and local food activists remain oblivious to the food system's reliance on exploitable and deportable labor (Gray 2013; Sbicca 2018).

The substandard, overcrowded, and hidden nature of the housing I observed is the shameful underbelly of the food system. After toiling all day workers do not even have space to recharge, recreational equipment, or entertainment opportunities for themselves or their children. They have difficulty procuring food materials or obtaining a good night's sleep. Such conditions take a toll on mental and physical health. The conditions of housing camps are part of the structural violence that

farmworkers are forced to endure during their tenure of work. According to Paul Farmer (2004), structural violence is subtle, often invisible, and attributable to no one specific person.

The uniqueness of this study relates to findings highlighting how outreach takes place on the ground, and that farmworkers are visible to outreach workers. If the seasonal and transient nature of migrant labor and the spatial politics of their exclusion by containing them in camps reproduce the invisibility that erases them from tourist materials and critical explorations of food production, outreach staff “see” farmworkers and visit them to build rapport, offer services, and provide some checks to monitor their living and working conditions, sometimes reporting violations of legal standards. Given the importance of this role, outreach should be considered valuable. However, agencies tend to hire outreach workers seasonally; longer-term staff positions should be created. Additionally, unimpeded entry to camps to contact workers for outreach purposes should occur in a smoother manner.

Another contribution of this article relates to Michigan and migrant labor. In comparison to other states, understanding of the history of the evolution of migrant labor from the beginnings of the sugar beet industry to the use of guest workers today in Michigan is limited (Mapes 2009). Likewise, research has not paid attention to the fact that the state government is heavily invested in making Michigan an attractive place for farmworkers to choose as an employment destination. I saw first-hand during outreach, and through virtual meetings with the IMSC, that Michigan invests in social services for securing its agricultural workforce, including provision of migrant educational services for farmworker children, from daycare to summer school.

Research must highlight the important role of outreach and staff in the provision of services and advocacy to farmworkers in hard-to-access camps in Michigan. The federal court landmark decision in 1971 granting visitors right to access housing camps established Michigan as a leader in providing visibility to the issues affecting farmworkers. The advocacy of some service providers and farmworker advocates ensured that Michigan continued that tradition during the COVID-19 outbreak, prompting the governor to become aware of the overcrowded conditions in housing camps and farms and signing an executive order on 1 June 2020 offering protections to agricultural workers living in congregate housing to live safely and prevent the spread of the disease (Executive Order No. 111, 2020). And, in 2021, the state of Michigan designated July as “farmworker appreciation month.”

There are other avenues where more advocacy and visibility of the conditions of farmworkers is warranted. Since the late 1990s, changes to Michigan’s unemployment benefit distribution law that excludes farmers from having to pay unemployment benefits to workers have hurt farmworkers, but there are presently no appeals or advocacy to change the policy (Villagrán 2019). Similarly, housing conditions have remained unchanged for the last several decades (Villagrán 2019), and Michigan has not passed any new farmworker housing laws since 1978 (Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development 2019). Although outreach makes farmworkers visible to staff, farmworkers remain invisible in many a tourist or pastoral town, and local Michiganders and visitors are unaware of their presence. Service organizations should bring farmworkers out of the shadows, describing their appalling living and

working conditions, their contributions to our food, the systemic factors inherent in our long-term increased dependence on migrant labor, and the need to reform the temporary guest worker program (Mapes 2009; Wozniacka 2019).

Addressing the systemic working and living conditions through farmworker justice organizations seem mostly to have dissipated, while what often remains, according to Villagrán (2019), are social service programs for farmworkers promoting educational and job training opportunities. It must be pointed out, with so many service providers, it is hard to conclude to what extent a focus on provision of immediate services and not long term change furthers the status quo, as farmworkers continue to live in deplorable conditions. Service providers are certainly not responsible and do not promote the degrading working and living conditions farmworkers face, but they are also fulfilling a neoliberal function, helping the state give relatively small amounts of money and services to service programs to quell dissent and keep reformers and interventionists at bay (see Villagrán 2019). Those who might otherwise be working as farmworker organizers or activists pushing for systemic changes to American farming practices are instead a part of the state and nation's solution to keeping a poorly constructed system of exploited migrant labor intact for more than a hundred years.

Study limitations

This study has a number of limitations. Western Michigan is a large “fruit belt” with many farms, farmworkers, and migrant camps (Larson 2013)—I was able to visit and base the study on only a few of them. I also was not able to examine the working conditions of farmworkers, as gaining access is extremely difficult. Given the short timeline of the growing season, the distance from where I live, the hard-to-find location of the labor camps, the limited staff conducting outreach, and my limited familiarity with Spanish, I had a small field of vision. Furthermore, I have not been able to include farmworkers' voices and narratives in this study.

Reimagining the visibility of farmworkers

Tourism and agriculture are Michigan's second and third largest industries (Moore 2014). The state has four seasons, many tourist destinations, beautiful lakes, rivers, and greenery, and the fruit-heavy western half of the state on the coast of Lake Michigan continues to be a central zone of production, with blueberries in the southwest and apples and cherries more prominent to the north. Hidden from sight are hundreds of seasonal farm laborers working in the production of fruits, vegetables, horticultural specialties, and dairy, industries that are largely dependent on manual labor to ultimately put food on the store shelves, farmers markets, restaurants, and family tables. Although many people and businesses embrace “shop Michigan” and alternative food movements, these movements should be envisioned to highlight farmworkers and their contributions. If a common mandate of the alternative food movement is to “know where one's food comes from,” this should include knowing the farmers and their farmworkers and the conditions under which the workers

live and work. If we acknowledge our dependence on an agricultural work force, we must advocate to promote better wages, housing conditions, health benefits, and social services to attract and stabilize the agricultural labor force. Farmworker housing cannot become more visible unless we visit, document conditions, and build camps in locations easier to oversee.

This project has challenged me to become aware of my own lack of awareness of farmworkers in my grocery purchases and on travels, and to work to track and increase my efforts to increase farmworker visibility. It has been a long journey, motivating me to learn Spanish. The contributions of farmworkers and their invisibility have now become a focus of my research, teaching, and support for organizations benefiting farmworkers such as Farmworkers Legal Services and the CIW. Comments from many of my students who are native Michiganders in response to my sharing insights and fieldnotes reveal they too are unaware of farmworkers and their contributions in the towns they live or travel in, throughout the state, or in their food consumption, and that they are motivated to increase their cognizance.

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Kennedy Saldanha is a professor of social work at the College of Health and Human Services, Eastern Michigan University. His research interests include migration, homelessness, diversity, culturally sensitive practice, and the development of critical qualitative research methods.