



Center for Worker Health

Wake Forest School of Medicine

POLICY BRIEF

Alcohol Consumption and Potential for Dependence among North Carolina Farmworkers

Summary

Alcohol consumption and alcohol dependence for farmworkers are major health concerns. This study interviewed 235 Latino male North Carolina migrant farmworkers and 212 Latino immigrant men not engaged in farm work in 2012. It found that 49% of farmworkers engaged in heavy episodic drinking (5 or more drinks at one time) in the previous 3 months, and half of those engaged in heavy episodic drinking at least 2 times per month. Over a third of farmworkers abstained from drinking: 35% reported not drinking alcohol in previous 3 months, including 18% who reported never drinking alcohol in their lives. Based on positive responses to at least 2 of 4 screening questions, 39% of farmworkers were at risk for alcohol dependence. The percentage of non-farmworkers who did not drink ever or in the previous 3 months, and who engaged in heavy episodic drinking was similar to that for farmworkers. However, only 16% of the non-farmworkers were at risk for alcohol dependence.

Health outreach workers and health care providers should include alcohol screening in their standard activities. Culturally appropriate education programs and interventions to reduce heavy episodic alcohol consumption and the risk for alcohol dependence among farmworkers are needed. Policies that reduce substandard housing, harsh work conditions, and social isolation will help reduce alcohol consumption and risk for dependence among farmworkers.

Why does it matter?

Alcohol consumption and dependence among farmworkers is a concern due to their direct health effects. Alcohol consumption and dependence also increase other risky behaviors by:

- encouraging unsafe sex and violence, and
- impeding safe work practices.

Alcohol consumption and dependence can reduce the resources of these already economically vulnerable workers, and place them at risk for greater exploitation, such as wage theft and human trafficking.

Anecdotal information about farmworker alcohol consumption abounds, yet little research documents actual alcohol consumption or dependence among farmworkers, or compares alcohol consumption or dependence of farmworkers with other Latino immigrants not engaged in farm work. More information is needed about alcohol consumption and dependence among Latino farmworkers, the degree to which farmworkers differ from other Latino immigrants in alcohol consumption, and factors associated with farmworkers' risk for alcohol dependence so culturally appropriate interventions can be developed.



Trash at farmworker camp

Research for this policy brief is reported in:

Arcury TA, Talton JW, Summers P, Chen H, Laurienti PJ, Quandt SA. Alcohol consumption and risk for dependence among male Latino migrant farmworkers compared to Latino non-farmworkers in North Carolina. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 2016; 42:377-384.

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What did the researchers do?

In May–August 2012, researchers interviewed 235 Latino male migrant farmworkers working in three North Carolina counties (Harnett, Johnston, Sampson), and 212 Latino immigrant men not engaged in farm work in one North Carolina county (Forsyth). All participants were asked about their life-time and current (in the past 3 months) alcohol consumption behavior. Participants were told that a drink was a 12 ounce can or bottle of beer, or malt beverage; a 5 ounce glass of wine; 1 wine cooler; or 1 shot of liquor. They also completed the CAGE screening tool; answering two or more of the four CAGE questions affirmatively indicates that a person is at risk for alcohol dependence.

What did the researchers find?

- Farmworkers reported a range of alcohol consumption.
 - Almost half engaged in heavy episodic drinking (5 or more drinks at one time)
 - 49% engaged in heavy episodic drinking in the previous 3 months, including 24% who frequently engaged in heavy episodic drinking (2 or more times per month)
 - Over one-third did not drink alcohol:
 - 35% reported not drinking alcohol in previous 3 months, including 18% who reported never drinking alcohol in their lives
- Farmworkers and non-farmworkers did not differ significantly in either the frequency of heavy episodic drinking or abstinence.
- Beer was the alcoholic beverage generally consumed by both farmworkers and non-farmworkers; consumption of wine or liquor was seldom reported.
- Farmworkers were at greater risk for alcohol dependence than non-farmworkers. Based on responding affirmatively to at least 2 of the 4 CAGE questions, 38% of farmworkers were at risk for alcohol dependence, compared to only 16% of non-farmworkers ($p < 0.0001$).
 - Being a farmworker and reporting stress were the major significant risk factors for alcohol dependence.
 - Being married reduced the risk of alcohol dependence.

Recommendations

- Health outreach workers and health care providers should include alcohol dependence screening in their standard activities, and implement education programs addressing the direct risks of alcohol consumption and the indirect risks of unsafe sex and violence.
- Policies should be implemented to try to reduce the stresses associated with heavy episodic drinking among farmworkers. These policies should reduce:
 - The substandard housing conditions in which farmworkers live,
 - The harsh work conditions that they endure, and
 - The social isolation that they experience.
- Culturally-appropriate interventions to reduce alcohol dependence need to be developed. These interventions should:
 - Increase communications of farmworkers with their families,
 - Reduce social isolation among migrant farmworkers in their labor camps, and
 - Make recreational activities other than alcohol consumption available to these workers.

Additional reading

Duke MR, Gómez Carpineiro FJ (2009) The effects of problem drinking and sexual risk among Mexican migrant workers on their community of origin. *Hum Organ* 68:328-339.

Garcia V (2008) Problem drinking among transnational Mexican migrants: exploring migrant status and situational factors. *Hum Organ* 67:12-24.

Grzywacz JG, Quandt SA, Isom S, Arcury TA (2007) Alcohol use among immigrant Latino farmworkers in North Carolina. *Am J Ind Med* 50:617-625.

Mayfield D, McLeod, G, Hall (1974) The CAGE questionnaire: validation of a new alcoholism screening instrument. *Am J Psychiatry* 131:1121-1123.