

It's not just the heat: Bad policies contributing to heat-related deaths in farmworkers

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With this summer slated to be the hottest on record, more and more people, especially farmworkers, are at even higher risks of heatstroke. In fact, the state of California is currently investigating whether heat exposure caused three deaths in California's Central Valley this July.

A new book by University of Colorado Denver anthropologist Sarah Horton argues that heat fatalities are likely to continue among American [farmworkers](#) without reform of immigration, labor, health-care and food safety policies.

Farmworkers experience more heat fatalities than any other group of outdoor laborers. Workers in California continued to experience heat-related illnesses even after the state became the first in the nation to require employers to provide shade, water, and rest breaks during high heat.

"State laws that grant outdoor workers relief from the heat are only a first step in our efforts to reduce heat deaths," said Horton. "Policy change on multiple fronts is necessary in order to combat the epidemic of heat-related deaths among farmworkers."

Putting heat death in a broader context, Horton's book "They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields: Illness, Injury and 'Illegality' among U.S. Farmworkers" examines the lives, work conditions, and health status of

15 immigrant workers who harvest melon and corn in California's Central Valley over the course of 10 years.

Her research shows that the exclusion of farmworkers from standard labor protections contributes to excessive and continuous work and encourages [heat illness](#). For example, in California workers are only eligible for overtime pay once they have worked over 60 hours a week. During the harvest season, workers routinely put in 70-hour work weeks to pick the quickly ripening fruit, exposing them to high temperatures for long periods of time.

Farmworkers who are paid a set amount for each box of produce they fill are also more likely to forego state-mandated breaks in order to earn more money. This "piece rate" work increases the risk of heatstroke.

In the book, Horton also exposes the phenomenon of "identity masking," in which labor supervisors require employees to use the valid work documents of others in order to evade immigration and labor laws. The documents include green cards and Social Security Numbers. The practice makes it very unlikely that workers will inform labor supervisors when they need a break or become ill because they are vulnerable to employer retaliation and charges of identity theft.

Exclusion from health care also contributes to heat related illness in the fields. Undocumented farmworkers have long been excluded from preventive health care so many enter the fields unaware that chronic conditions like hypertension or diabetes place them at risk of dying from heat.

Finally, Horton shows that industry efforts to prevent outbreaks of foodborne illness often come at the price of worker health. Industry associations are increasingly implementing state-approved food safety certifications that prohibit workers from taking their own water supplies

into the fields.

Farmworkers, Horton argues, are entitled to the same labor protections as anyone else and changing policies could prevent very serious heat illness. They should be included in standard overtime laws. And those working piece-rate should be compensated for their breaks. At the same time, states should use Medicaid funds to extend coverage to undocumented immigrants in order to fill the gaps in coverage left by the Affordable Care Act.

Policies should also be enacted that grant amnesty to workers who report workplace abuse to help counter the impact of punitive immigration laws on immigrant working conditions.

Horton says that if the state of California is serious about reducing [heat](#) fatalities among farmworkers, it should do more than provide them water, rest, and shade. "Heat fatalities are a symptom of a much bigger problem," she says. "California has historically led the nation by example in passing protections for farmworkers. By mandating standard overtime for farmworkers and including undocumented [workers](#) in state Medicaid programs, California has the opportunity to be on the vanguard of farmworker rights once again."

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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