

Why poor sleep quality can be a matter of life and death for migrant roofers

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Migrant roofers in the U.S. helping communities rebuild from natural disasters often struggle with poor quality of sleep, according to new research from Rice University. The issue can be a matter of life and

death for these individuals, who are working in environments where a sleepy misstep can literally end their life or permanently injure them.

The article, "How Housing, Employment and Legal Precarity Affect the Sleep of Migrant Workers: A Mixed-Methods Study," [published](#) Jan. 9 in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, is part of a larger study examining how different factors—including housing, employment and [legal status](#)—impact the lives of [migrant workers](#) who travel to and within the U.S. to help communities rebuild following [natural disasters](#), which are growing in number and severity amid climate change concerns.

"It takes communities months and sometimes years to rebuild following these storms," said lead researcher Sergio Chávez, associate professor of sociology. "There is an extraordinary demand for the services of these migrant workers following disasters, and it's why we wanted to take a closer look at their lives and working conditions."

In the current article, Chávez and Jing Li, adjunct associate professor of sociology and quantitative methodologist, used a targeted survey and in-depth interviews to learn more about migrant roofers who restore communities affected by natural disasters. Specifically, they looked at how employment and housing affect these workers' sleep as they face job instability and substandard, irregular housing.

"Because many migrant workers are undocumented and work in the shadows of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, we also investigated how workers' legal status (or a lack thereof) impacts their sleep," the researchers wrote.

Compared to workers residing in permanent [housing](#), temporary dwellers were more likely to report restless sleep and sleep problems, according to the research. In addition, roofers who worked fewer days a month or

reported stress due to not being able to work were more likely to report sleep problems.

In comparison to their documented peers, undocumented workers were more likely to report shorter sleep duration, restless sleep and general sleep problems. Some of the respondents directly mentioned that not having "papers" (legal authorization to work) was a stressor.

Those with family in the U.S. worried about being targeted by authorities, which could lead to deportation and separation from loved ones. Those with partners and children abroad said that lacking legal status also meant many years without seeing their family, which caused stress and disrupted their sleep.

"Sleep is a critical component of [health](#) and an understudied health behavior," Li said. "Previous research demonstrates how poor sleep can increase the risk of obesity, anxiety and depression, all of which can lead to other negative health conditions."

In addition to the potential long-term health effects, Chávez said the lack of sleep can also make the dangerous work these migrant workers do on a daily basis even more harrowing. He and Li plan to conduct future studies on other aspects of work and life experiences of these individuals.

More information: Sergio Chávez et al, How Housing, Employment, and Legal Precarity Affect the Sleep of Migrant Workers: A Mixed-Methods Study, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00221465231214825](https://doi.org/10.1177/00221465231214825)

Provided by Rice University

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