

Crossing the Border:

Comparative Approaches to Farmworker Housing and Health Issues

By Barbara Rose, Sarah Wylie

Authors

Barbara Rose, MPH candidate, has held many social work and teaching positions before returning to graduate school.

Farmworker policy taps her Kansas roots and her six-month experience living in central Mexico as an undergraduate. Sarah Wylie, MPH candidate, decided to pursue a career in public health policy after living abroad and working in social epidemiology at a major urban hospital. The Boston native has lived in Europe, Latin America, and the South Pacific.

Realizing our careers in social work and research were too focused on individual behavior changes, we each returned to graduate school to study systems approaches to public health practice. The case-based learning modules in the University of Washington's Community Oriented Public Health Practice Program served us well in this regard, as they emphasize social and economic influences on health. A recent health policy assignment illustrates our process in moving away from individual-level health interventions.

What began as a community-based assignment on ways to improve the health of Washington's seasonal and migrant farmworkers expanded to a position paper we submitted to the American Public Health Association and to a cross-border collaboration with Canadian students and faculty studying similar issues. From our Canadian colleagues, we gained a broader international perspective for this project and our careers.

Farmworker housing and health are intimately connected, and our initial policy recommendations outlined critical areas of improvement in on-farm, community-based, and private-market shelter. In Washington, the approximately 187,000 farmworkers laboring in specialty crop production – many of whom are undocumented – have diverse health and housing needs. Some rural communities lack rental housing for those who wish to live there permanently, while others have a shortage of temporary seasonal beds. Farmworkers and their families often crowd into poorly maintained or overcrowded shelters where disease is easily transmitted. When farmworkers get sick, they and their families face additional barriers to accessing medical and social services.

After meeting with growers, housing advocates, and other public health researchers, we concluded that issues of farmworker housing and health cannot be addressed at the individual or even community levels. They are entwined with larger systems issues such as federal immigration and agricultural policies, rural housing development, and limited the capacity of growers and local governments to follow and enforce housing regulations.

We presented our paper at the University of Washington-University of British Columbia-Simon Fraser University Sixth Annual Public

Health Symposium to solicit feedback and realized a significant shortcoming of our initial recommendations: the lack of cross-border comparisons.

In the daily havoc of academia, it can be easy to forget the US and Canada are not unique in the challenges they face. Washington and British



Barbara Rose and Sarah Wylie
Photo courtesy Sarah Paliulis.

Columbia share similar geographic features and agricultural industries, yet these function in vastly different legal and health promotion systems. Because farmworkers have legal authorization to be in Canada through guest worker programs, public health workers can address health issues without getting bogged down by immigration reform.

After learning more about cross-border differences, we were eager to get a first-hand look at the contrasting political landscapes that lead to differences in farmworker health and housing situations. On the suggestion of a Canadian government representative, we applied for a travel grant to build relationships with our Canadian counterparts and continue our learning process. It is our hope that future collaboration will generate more informed recommendations for improving farmworker housing and health and promote sustainability of our shared regional economies and food systems. ■