



# Introduction to the symposium: *Bienestar*—the well-being of Latinx farmworkers in a time of change

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## Abstract

This symposium explores the well-being of Latinx farmworkers living and laboring in the United States. Our primary aim is to take a deeper look at the lived experiences of farmworkers. In the introduction, we explore the various ways in which well-being is framed in diverse academic disciplines, and how the concept of well-being has been employed in previous research on Latinx farmworkers. We argue that ethnographic methods have potential to represent farmworker experiences in a more nuanced manner than many other social science approaches. We advocate further research and action in terms of farmworker safety, health (including mental health and access to care), food security and food provisioning, rural isolation and access to housing, poverty and job security. Finally, we argue that farmworkers should be considered active and important actors in the context of global environmental change. Ultimately, the well-being of farmworkers is co-dependent on global environmental health and sustainability.

**Keywords** Latinx · Farmworkers · Well-being · Sustainability

## Introduction: farmworker well-being and sustainability

Alongside the growing consolidation, industrialization, and transnationalization of the U.S. food system, hiring laborers from off the farm has long been the primary strategy for meeting the production needs of farming operations in which labor needs exceed local labor availability. Foreign-born workers labor in all sectors and scales of the food system, from the smallest family farms to the largest corporate food operations, in both organic and conventional production. As of 2015, the industries related to food and agriculture contributed \$992 billion to the U.S. economy,

equaling 5.5% of GDP (USDA Economic Research Service 2019a). Although the total number of hired farmworkers has decreased since 1950, the proportion of hired farmworkers to self-employed and family farmworkers has increased during this same period (USDA Economic Research Service 2019b). According to data from the National Agricultural Workers Survey from 2013 to 2014, 80% of all farmworkers are categorized as “Hispanic,” with 68% born in Mexico and 4% in Central American nations (US Department of Labor 2016). Given the informal or off-the-books nature of many agricultural jobs, it is very likely that this figure is underestimated. Despite the importance of Latinx farmworkers in sustaining national and global food systems and thereby the health and well-being of myriad people, they experience ongoing threats to their well-being as their living and working conditions remain unhealthy and their very presence in many areas is questioned.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this introduction, we use the term Latinx as a gender-neutral term to refer to individuals and communities of Latin American descent. We have chosen to use Latinx in order to be inclusive of multiple and pluralistic gendered identities and sexual orientations, while also recognizing the complicated and contested nature of all terms. Other terms, including Latino/a, Hispano/a, Mexicano/a, also appear throughout the articles, particularly when quoting research participants and discussing how they describe their own ethnic and racial identities. While Mexican-origin workers make up the majority of the workers discussed in this symposium, workers from other

The United States has seen a growing reliance on non-family farm labor since the end of World War II, with the ratio of hired farmworkers to total farmworkers growing from 1 in 4 in 1950 to 1 in 3 in 2014 (Kandel 2008; Hertz 2014). Today, approximately 50% of farmworkers are living and working in the U.S. without legal work permits (USDA).<sup>2</sup> Although nearly 80% of farmworkers are foreign born as mentioned above, most no longer migrate in the traditional transnational sense, returning to their home countries with less frequency, if at all. Most farmworkers in the U.S. today live within a 75-mile radius of their place of employment, and many do so year-round rather than moving along seasonal work patterns (US Department of Agriculture, NAWS 2018). Today, farmworkers travel in smaller circuits and often settle and raise families in rural communities, shaping these communities in distinct cultural, political, and economic ways. Border security policies have contributed significantly to this demographic shift, as families choose to stay together as undocumented laborers or mixed-status families rather than risk the perils of border crossing (Hamilton and Hale 2016).

In this introduction and the articles that follow we connect our exploration of farmworker well-being with holistic conceptions of sustainability. Well-being is framed in many ways across diverse academic disciplines, with definitions ranging from subjective measures focused on happiness or health, to more quantifiable variables like wealth, life expectancy, or educational attainment. However, we find that, more often than not, the concept remains undefined. Indeed, it is a “complex, multi-faceted construct that has continued to elude researchers’ attempts to define and measure” (Pollard and Lee 2003, p. 60). Despite the absence of a clearly unpacked and measurable concept, many scholars have argued its value and usefulness as a tool for evaluating impacts on quality of life (Dodge et al. 2012; Diener and Chan 2011; Diener et al. 2003). In this symposium, we explore the well-being of Latinx farmworkers living and laboring in the United States. While each geographic location and agricultural sector we explore is unique, we approach the idea of well-being as interconnected experiences of physical, mental, and social health that are shaped by a complex milieu of cultural, social, political, and economic factors. It is not our aim in this symposium to present an overarching assessment and singular definition of well-being, but rather to take a deeper look into the meanings, experiences, and implications of specific meanings

and implications of well-being in the lived experiences of farmworkers.

As researchers committed to in-depth fieldwork, we believe that social inclusion and equality are both key to ensuring wellbeing. In their now classic essay, Allen and Sachs argued that those concerned with agricultural sustainability must consider the importance of social sustainability (1991). Critically examining the dominant discourse at that time, these groundbreaking feminist thinkers took issue with what they observed as a failure to address social inequalities related to class, gender, race and ethnicity. They underscored that “[f]arm workers have received few of the benefits of profitable and abundant agriculture; compared to farm owners, their incomes are much lower, their living conditions are worse, their control of the production process is less and they are more exposed to pesticides and have higher incidences of health problems related to pesticide use” (*Ibid.*, p. 581). Even as the past 30 years have seen important progress in the field of sustainable agriculture, there is still much to do to ensure that the social side of sustainability is considered with equal weight as questions of environmental and financial sustainability.

In the four research articles included in this symposium, we engage the meanings and interconnections of well-being and sustainability as we investigate a variety of geographic locations and agricultural industries across the U.S. This includes two studies of dairy workers in the northeastern border state of Vermont—one focusing on two applied projects addressing mental/emotional health and food access (Mares et al.) and one focusing on access to healthcare and self-medication practices (Wolcott-MacCausland et al.), one study of Latina farmworkers and their challenges in providing food for themselves and their families in southwestern Idaho (Meierotto and Som-Castellano), and one study of indigenous Latin American berry workers and the bodily effects of their work in Washington State (Holmes).

Collectively, these four studies highlight several commonalities and differences that farmworkers experience in these disparate contexts. Importantly, we consider how racialization, gender, age, geography, and immigration status intersect with conceptualizations of well-being, including food security, access to health care (including mental health care), and equal protection under the law. The unifying thread across these articles is that each addresses the question of well-being amidst significant precarity and transition. Transitions impacting farmworker well-being include the physical movement of farmworkers, shifting farmworker demographics (include immigration status, gender, age, ethnicity and language (including indigenous languages), shifts in regional social and political acceptance versus discrimination and exclusion, and shifts in local and regional food systems. These articles demonstrate that demographic transitions in our agricultural labor force must be understood

Footnote 1 (continued)

countries are included and we wish to emphasize that some experiences of im/migrant status and racialization are similar while others vary based on country of origin and other markers of identity.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor/>.

within broader discussions of rapidly changing policies and public discourse at national, state, and local levels. In order to better understand how these transitions impact farmworker well-being, we examine how farmworkers conceptualize and evaluate their own sense of well-being and how they seek to protect and improve their health.

In this symposium, we consider farmworkers from several different cultural/social/gender groups:

- Latina residents
- Latinx migrants born in Mexico and Central American countries
- H-2A farmworkers
- Indigenous farmworkers born in Latin America

In our examination of these groups, we ask the following questions: How does well-being differ for undocumented migrants, documented migrant workers, and settled Latinx farmworkers? How do differences in wellbeing relate to segmented capitalism, multi-layered citizenship, racialization, hierarchies of gender as well as to resistance and both individual and collective action?

The studies presented in this symposium are unique and important as they follow and engage an experience-near, or emic, understanding of well-being.<sup>3</sup> This approach is challenging and we do not claim to represent fully any one group of people, we work with the intent of conveying the direct statements, observations, and experiences of farmworkers as they were related to us as researchers engaged in and committed to in-depth fieldwork. One of our primary goals in developing this body of work is to provide a platform for the words and narratives of farmworkers. Each of the articles in this symposium advocates for ethnographic research approaches as a means to represent farmworker experiences and highlight farmworker voices, values and insights in a more nuanced manner than allowed by many other methods.

There is a lack of scholarly work on the lived experiences of farmworkers, especially women farmworkers (c.f. Meierotto and Som-Castellano). Ethnographic methods offer an opportunity for the voices, perspectives, and insights of farmworkers to be shared with researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers. We see an example of this approach in Mares et al., utilizing ethnography as a means to understand

<sup>3</sup> The idea of “emic” research is contested in the field of anthropology. In this discussion, we use the term “emic” to signify that our research, via ethnography, seeks to privilege as much as possible farmworker perspectives. Experience-near approaches are used across the social sciences to value local expertise and opinion, as opposed to privileging only or primarily the knowledge and expertise of researchers. And, with this in mind, we make no claims that we are able to represent fully the beliefs, ideas, feelings or experiences of the farmworkers with whom we work (neither individually nor as a community).

and address farmworker mental health concerns and food insecurity through collaborative cartooning and gardening projects. We see another example in Wolcott MacCausland and colleagues’ study of how farmworkers in Vermont obtain medications and other health care products, revealing the concerns and confusion that farmworkers experience regarding locally (un)available medicine. Ethnography, in all of these cases, becomes a counterweight to the erasures at times enabled through statistical mediation. While we engage the strengths of ethnography, we also engage statistical measures even as we question them (c.f. Holmes). We do not seek to develop statistics as the sole means to advocate for policy change, though immigration and farm labor policies are in desperate need of change. And, in presenting data on the outcomes of agri-food inequalities, we do not seek to “change policy without analyzing the underlying conditions of exploitation and hierarchy” (Holmes 25). Rather, we hope that presenting ethnographic work in this interdisciplinary journal will highlight linkages between human experience and broader political economic and social systems.

Lastly, it is important to note that this collection of articles is offered at a time during which anti-immigrant rhetoric is pervasive across the U.S. (and many other countries) and the future of this country, self-represented as a diverse and inclusive democracy, is in critical question. We hope this presentation of original research not only sheds light on farmworker well-being and the sustainability of the food systems on which we all depend, but also serves to acknowledge and highlight the multi-faceted humanity of an all-too-often invisibilized population.

## Defining well-being in relation to Latinx Farmworkers—a brief review

To begin, we offer some thoughts on the definition and conceptualization of well-being. We consider current research that engages the concept of well-being, highlighting relations to farmworkers specifically. We then discuss shortcomings in current usages of well-being. Finally, we argue that a full understanding of well-being can only derive from an emic, or experience-near, perspective to the greatest extent possible. We believe it is imperative that researchers consider how farmworkers themselves define well-being, rather than relying solely upon “expert” perspectives.

Scholars have developed multiple approaches to study, quantify, and characterize well-being, addressing themes such as happiness, income, health, and access to housing. Bellinger (2018) suggests there are two primary ways to gauge human well-being: subjective and objective. The subjective measures derive from an individual’s perspective on their own quality of life (3). The objective approach considers measurable outcomes, including variables like

infant mortality rates and educational attainment, among others. Inequality itself is often left unexplored, yet may significantly affect both subjective and material well-being. For this reason, examining the well-being of farmworkers who live and work within a wide range of inequalities, is particularly important. Amartya Sen suggests that “well-being should be understood in terms of people’s real opportunities” (quoted in Richardson and Schokaert 2017). While Sen’s work focuses primarily on people living in the developing world, concepts from his seminal work *Development as Freedom* (1999) are equally relevant for the study of the well-being of Latinx farmworkers in the U.S. For example, Sen convincingly demonstrates that there is often a “dissonance between income per head... and the freedom of individuals to live long and live well” (1999, p. 5).

There is simultaneously a rising body of work that aims to capture multiple “markers” or “measures” of well-being. For example, Cueller et al. state that “well-being can be defined broadly to include physical health status or its perception, emotional well-being, and life satisfaction, including happiness” (2004, p. 456). These authors use five independent measures of well-being: Index of Life Satisfaction; Daily Stressors-16; Depressive Symptoms Scale; Health Inventory-26; and Self Esteem (RSE-8). Herbst and Gonzalez-Gourda—drawing upon Prilleltensky—describe the well-being of migrants as “a positive state of affairs in which individual, relational, organizational, societal, and environmental needs and aspirations are fulfilled” (2018, p. 138). According to Prilleltensky, the “resources required for thriving are tied to dynamic interactions between aspects of justice, protective factors, and risk factors” (2018, p. 138). This means that:

exploring the well-being of Latina/o migrant workers requires us to acquire foundational knowledge about demographical information associated with this population (i.e. individual, organizational, and societal level risk and protective factors), physical and mental health (i.e. individual, relational, and ecological level risk and protective factors), and barriers to accessing care (i.e. organizational and societal level risk and protective factors) (Herbst and Gonzalez-Guarda 2018, p. 138).

In another study of Latinx day-laborers, well-being is defined as “the ability to provide for their families as well as a release from the stressors” associated with their daily labor (Negi et al. 2013, p. 750). Together, these studies strive to quantitatively measure farmworker well-being. While the broadening of the ways in which social scientists conceptualize well-being is important, there remains a need to move beyond demographic data collection and “expert” definitions.

In this inquiry into wellbeing, we advocate for the use of ethnography as a method that can serve as a counterweight

to the structural violence and lack of agency that shape the lived realities of many farmworkers. Holmes’ previous work (2011) provides a scaffolding to the analyses presented here and his article included in the symposium builds upon his previous work. In this symposium, he guides social scientists into a realm of “new possibility” and shows how, while farmworkers face a lifetime of pain and injury, single acts of injury, food insecurity, and other markers of being un-well are seen by farm managers and society only as quasi-events that do not require a meaningful response or change. The injury/absence of well-being is understood as long-term, a part of the farmworkers’ life instead of a specific illness or injury related to their current job.

Ultimately, we advocate that rather than relying solely upon “expert” definitions of well-being, researchers should employ “open-ended questions to explore how participants manage and define well-being within their work and life contexts” (Negi et al. 2013, p. 250). These two aspects serve as the starting point for our working definition of well-being: providing economically for oneself and one’s family (and the social and political structures necessary to do so) and freedom from harmful physical and psychological stress (inflected powerfully by social and political context).

### Core areas of well-being in relation to Latinx farmworkers

Together, we move beyond merely documenting the struggles of farmworkers and reifying statistical measures and analyses of wellbeing. Indeed, we believe that, all too often, “statistics are wielded to change policy without analyzing the underlying and targeted conditions of exploitation and hierarchy. They do not bring attention to historically entrenched inequalities nor do they bring an unfolding of potentiality or redirection of current political and economic forms” (Holmes, this issue). Given our shared motivations and collective goals, we seek to encourage further research into the well-being of the workers who provide us with our food but, as importantly, to stimulate political and social action in solidarity with this often hidden, marginalized and even criminalized population. The following are areas in which we hope to spur research and action in relation to the well-being of Latinx farmworkers in the U.S.:

- Safety
- Health, including Mental Health and Access to Care
- Food Security and Food Provisioning
- Rural Isolation and Access to Housing
- Poverty and Job Security

In the following subsections, we offer a review of current literature on farmworker well-being. We use this an

opportunity to create a road-map of recent studies related to farmworker well-being, as well as a way to contextualize our own research.

## Safety

Agricultural work is one of the most hazardous sectors of the economy. Safety and health concerns in the workplace are compounded by the unsafe and unhealthy living conditions in which many farmworkers live. And there is an emerging body of research that frames well-being within the context of occupational health and safety risks (Anthony et al. 2010; Grzywacz et al. 2013; Horton and Stewart 2012; Ramos et al. 2016; Robinson et al., 2011).

In this symposium, worker safety is a recurring theme. Holmes considers the work injuries of indigenous Mexican migrant workers in the western United States and the effects of statistical collectivization on the (non-)response to these injuries. His paper revisits 18 months of field work with farmworkers throughout their migration from Washington State to California and the Mexican state of Oaxaca and back. Following the theorization of Massumi and Povinelli, the article uses the term, *quasi-event*, to indicate an occurrence that is ongoing and therefore experienced with uncertainty at every moment as to whether or not it has already happened or has yet to happen. Unlike events, again following Massumi and Povinelli, Holmes demonstrates how quasi-events are experienced as normal or ordinary in certain senses and do not produce the response required by events. Many of the forms of suffering of Mexican migrant laborers in the U.S. agrifood system, from knee injuries to back pain to pesticide exposure, are experienced as quasi-events and do not induce a significant response by the public. At times, as the quasi-events of multiple people are statistically conglomerated, the results may be experienced as an event inducing a public response. This article explores what is made visible and what is hidden in the process of statistically collectivizing the experiences of individual farmworker injury.

It must be noted that undocumented farmworkers in particular have little recourse when experiencing poor living and working conditions. These conditions can and often do end in death, and the occupational fatality rate for farmworkers was seven times higher than the rate of all other workers in private industry in 2011 (USDA OSHA 2013). Female farmworkers often experience sexual harassment and abuse in addition to these safety concerns. According to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), as many as 80% of female farmworkers experience sexual violence, and these women often fear reporting these crimes due to fear of police and other authorities (SPLC 2010).

## Health, including mental health and access to care

Related to injury, but addressing a broader scope of themes beyond workplace safety, several recent studies look at overall physical and mental health as well as health care as a core component of well-being (Anthony et al. 2010; Bacio et al. 2014; Baker and Chappelle 2012; Carvajal et al. 2014; Castañeda et al. 2015; Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2007; Cervantes et al. 2010; Horton and Stewart 2012; Holmes 2011; López-Cevallos et al. 2014; Letiecq et al. 2014; Magana and Hovey 2003; Pérez-Escamilla et al. 2010; Negi et al. 2013; Quesada et al. 2011; Ramos et al. 2015, 2016; Winkelman et al. 2013).

Despite the heightened health risks of agricultural work, only one-tenth of farmworkers have health insurance (Kandel 2008; SPLC 2010). This lack of protection is troubling given that farmworkers often lack adequate sanitation facilities and are regularly subjected to pesticides and other agricultural chemicals. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, there are an estimated 10,000–20,000 cases of diagnosed pesticide poisonings among farmworkers each year (NIOSH). However, this figure is likely a significant underestimate for many reasons. For example, in the case of fatal pesticide poisonings, the Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps certain fatality information confidential and the eventual cause of death is not always linked back to prior chemical exposure. At the same time, broad research shows that prolonged pesticide exposure is linked to a wide range of illnesses and health conditions, including reproductive health problems, cancer, birth defects, skin problems, Parkinson's disease, and neurological damage (Nicolopoulou-Stamati et al. 2016).

Mental illness and emotional health are commonly understood to be significant markers of well-being and the U.S. has the highest prevalence of anxiety and mood disorders in the world (WHO Mental Health Survey). Latinx immigrants, especially those separated from their families, are at higher risk for stress, anxiety, and depression, and have even more limited access to mental health services and medications (Hiott et al. 2018; Maldonado 2016; Zapata Roblyer et al. 2016; Vazquez et al. 2017). Some recent studies indicate specifically that Latinx farmworkers have poor mental health (e.g. Crain et al. 2015).

Each of the papers in this set analyzes, in different ways, Latinx farmworkers' poor experiences of health and poor access to health care. Holmes' article, as described above, relates to work injury and the social structures reproducing it. Meierotto and Som Castellano describe the ways in which rural isolation, low-income, and lack of access to traditional foods can result in decreasing health and well-being for Latina farmworkers. Wolcott-McCausland and her colleagues describe how Latinx migrant farmworkers face numerous health care barriers and how these barriers

foster self-medication using health products manufactured abroad. Mares and her colleagues share their collaborative work creating comic books based on narratives gathered from Vermont's farmworkers. These narratives focus on the mental health concerns persistent amongst dairy workers who experience severe isolation and disconnection as well as the strategies workers engage to protect their mental and emotional wellbeing. Using the tools of ethnography, these comics are collaboratively created to serve as both an outlet for the storyteller and a resource for other farmworkers experiencing similar mental health concerns.

### Food security and food provisioning

Studies show that farmworkers experience food insecurity at rates as high as three to four times the national average, with a disproportionate number of households experiencing very low food security (Borre et al. 2010; Brown and Getz 2011; Cason et al. 2006; Essa 2001; Kilanowski and Moore 2010; Kresge and Eastman 2010; Minkoff-Zern 2014; Moos 2008; Quandt et al. 2004; Sano et al. 2011; Villarejo et al. 2000; Weigel et al. 2007; Wirth et al. 2007). These figures are higher than food insecurity among the general population (11.8% as of 2017) as well as rates for "Hispanic" households in the U.S (18% as of 2017) (Coleman-Jenson et al. 2018). Studies have been conducted primarily with seasonal farmworkers, who routinely migrate multiple times each year and are most often paid through piece-rate arrangements. Less is known about the food security of farmworkers who labor year-round in sectors such as the dairy industry, though recent work by seeks to address this gap in knowledge (c.f. Mares 2019). In this symposium, Mares and colleagues share their work developing a food security project, called Huertas, in which farmworkers plant and maintain kitchen gardens to grow culturally appropriate foods in contexts in which access to these foods is severely compromised. They reveal both the promise and the limitations of this project in a rural border region with a short growing season and significant processes of marginalization.

Food security is central to any study of farm worker well-being, especially as more women join the agricultural sector, yet still remain the primary caregivers for their children and their families (Carney 2015). In this symposium, Meierotto and Som Castellano discuss food-provisioning strategies among agricultural workers in rural Idaho. In particular, they focus on the ways in which gender, race, and immigration status affect food security in farm-working families, reporting their initial findings from ethnographic fieldwork southwestern Idaho. Engaging a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, Meierotto and Som Castellano examine strategies such as accessing food banks, utilizing food stamps, purchasing groceries and accepting food from friends, family and employers. They explore food

provisioning strategies specifically in the context of demographic changes in Idaho. There is a marked transition in the American farm labor force to include more women— a process sometimes referred to as the "feminization of agriculture" (Lastarria-Cornhiel 2006). These authors show how any discussion of farmworker well-being must consider the increasing role of women farmworkers, as most markers of well-being have gender-specific dimensions. For example, they show how the experiences of workplace safety, pesticide exposure, access to health care and child-care must be studied specifically and differently in relation to female farm working populations.

### Rural isolation and access to housing

In our literature review on well-being, we find that a great deal of research focuses on sociopolitical and sociocultural components of well-being, including family separation (Letiecq et al. 2014; Negi et al. 2013). Studies look at social networks and the effects of social hierarchies on the lived experiences of farmworkers (Holmes, 2011; Negi et al. 2013; Padilla et al. 2014), as well as social suffering and cultural resilience (Bacio et al. 2014; Duke and Cunradi 2011; Herbst and Gonzalez-Guarda 2018; Holmes 2007; Negi et al. 2013). In this issue, we note repeatedly that rural isolation should be considered a significant challenge to farmworkers in terms of building social ties and maintaining cultural resilience. Three recent studies look specifically at how housing conditions affect the well-being of farmworkers (Arcury et al. 2012, 2015; Vallejos et al. 2011). In terms of housing and rural isolation, farmworkers experience an intersection of multiple challenges to well-being.

In this symposium, three articles consider how geographical considerations are central to Latinx farmworker well-being. The articles by Mares et al. and Wolcott-MacCausland et al. show the unique ways that well-being manifests, and is denied, in the rural countryside of Vermont. As a mostly-rural border state with an active presence of Border Patrol and ICE personnel, farmworkers in Vermont's dairy industry face difficulties and inequalities in relation to food security, nutritional health, mental health, and access to healthcare and medications. These challenges are produced by and endemic to the rural isolation farmworkers in Vermont experience. While the dangers and risks of the U.S. northern and southern borderlands are distinct in how they impact those who move through and reside within them, significant and persistent patterns of structural vulnerability and violence pervade the everyday lives of Latinx migrant farmworkers in Vermont. These two articles discuss both the causes and the outcomes of these structural factors in the lived realities of dairy farmworkers. In Vermont, one of the least racially diverse states in the nation, racialized histories and realities leave Latinx farmworkers "hypervisible"

in public (Mares 2019). This pushes farmworkers to avoid leaving their homes and places of work, due to awareness of ongoing surveillance by Border Patrol and ICE, definitively complicating their efforts to be well.

In a completely different setting, Meierotto and Som Castellano observe a shift away from employing migrant farm labor and towards the employment of “settled” Latinx people in surrounding communities in Idaho, a trend also seen nationally. Rural communities in Idaho lack public transportation, affordable grocery stores and sufficient housing. Many farmworkers live in USDA-subsidized housing projects and share small spaces with growing families. These authors call attention to the ways in which rural geography isolates Latinx farmworkers. Rural isolation impacts day-to-day activities, including providing food for one’s family and access to child care. Rural isolation intersects with ethnic/racial/gender/class difference and exacerbates inequality. In other words, the physical distance from grocery stores, medical facilities and childcare centers disproportionately affects Latina women.

### Poverty and job security

Latinx farmworkers experience irregular and inconsistent work, with double the unemployment rates of all wage and salary workers (Kandel 2008). Several recent studies focus on the impacts of wages and work availability on economic security (Easterlin et al. 2011; Padilla et al. 2014; Robinson et al. 2011). According to a Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA) report, only 13.5% of workers in the food system earn a livable wage, with 0% of agriculture and nursery workers surveyed reporting a livable wage (FCWA 2012). According to 2010 data from the National Agricultural Workers Survey, over three-fifths (61%) of the farmworker population lives below the poverty line (NAWS 2010). Farmworkers are also disproportionately impacted by wage theft and violations of minimum wage regulations. Based on the previously cited survey conducted by the FCWA, 92.9% of all workers experiencing wage theft were Latinx agricultural workers (FCWA 2012). Seasonal farmworkers experience poverty and economic instability at higher rates than farmworkers who remain settled, and women in particular experience these difficulties at high rates (Kandel 2008; SPLC 2010).

In some states, undocumented workers cannot utilize federal and state-based programs for the poor, including SNAP benefits, housing assistance, disability and unemployment or SSI; despite the fact that they pay billions into these federal programs annually (SPLC 2010). Although agricultural employers and farm labor contractors must abide by the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, for undocumented workers there is little recourse to ensure that the regulations of this act are followed (Holmes 2011).

Drawing this review of pertinent literature to a close, we offer several broad observations on the scholarship concerning the well-being of Latinx farmworkers:

- Well-being is defined and measured in a wide variety of ways, most developed by social scientists and policy-makers. What is missing is a more experience-near or emic understanding of well-being. For instance, how do Latinx define, evaluate or measure their own sense of well-being? What areas of well-being do Latinx farmworkers identify as most important? What do they experience as the greatest challenges or barriers to achieving well-being?
- Any study of farmworker well-being must take into account the multi-layered and intersectional experiences of farmworkers, especially those of social, economic and political exclusion and oppression as well as individual and collective resilience and resistance.

While we do not aim to provide a formula for measuring well-being among Latinx farmworkers, we do think it is necessary to illustrate ways in which the well-being of farmworkers is distinct from that of other groups of workers in the U.S. food system. Political exclusion due to immigration status, social exclusion resulting from racism or nationalistic movements, social isolation in rural locations, economic exclusion resulting from low wages, and health and educational disparities related to all these forms of exclusion effectively erode well-being. In this symposium we aim both to interrogate these inequalities and to bring greater attention to the ways that farmworkers conceptualize and seek to address wellbeing on their own terms.

### Conclusion and significance

While the papers that follow focus primarily on the lived experience of Latinx farmworkers, it is essential to point out that wellbeing is of course co-dependent on broader environmental conditions (Rogers et al. 2012). Access to basic amenities like clean water and protection from exposure to pesticides are two factors that should be central to advocacy efforts on behalf of Latinx farmworkers, or indeed, any underserved or marginalized community. At the same time, macro-level concerns, such as collective resistance and adaptation to climate change, must also be considered.

When we think about health and well-being on the broadest global scale, it does not make sense to focus solely on individual farmworkers. Rather, a move toward greater environmental sustainability “may also be the change that will do the most to increase human well-being” (Rogers et al. 2012, p. 61). Agriculture is central to global sustainability. At risk is the health of our soil (Smith et al. 2016; Montgomery

2007), human health (Jones and Ejetab 2015), and the overall health of the planet (Altieri 1995). There is a link between soil biodiversity, human health (Wall et al. 2015) and global biodiversity (Garibaldi et al. 2017). We argue that the health and well-being of people—of all genders, nationalities, ages, ethnicities, abilities and sexualities—who work in agriculture is equally central to these questions and deserves additional focus by both researchers and practitioners. At the local, national, and global level, we would be well-served to view immigrant agricultural workers as incredible assets for resilience and adaptation in the face of global climate change. As highlighted above, a recent study of immigrant farmers suggests they are more willing to experiment in new environments. The authors argue that we should look to “the knowledges and practices of migrants” as a way forward in the face of complex environmental problems like climate change (Klocker et al. 2017, p. 14). In this way, we acknowledge that the health and well-being of the planet is intricately connected to the health and well-being of all who labor in our food system, including those who have been forced to or chosen to move across national borders.

One step toward appropriate recognition of the important role Latinx farmworkers play in global sustainability is simple: we need to re-frame what is often represented as an immigrant farmworker “problem” in the U.S. Rather than representing farmworkers as a problem, we must recognize their many contributions and the centrality of farmworkers to everyone’s reliance on them for our health and well-being. Moreover, we need and deserve a paradigm shift into a social and political reality in which we collectively understand that *farmworker well-being is central to all people’s well-being*. This re-framing is extremely challenging in today’s political and social climate, in which immigrants are labeled as criminals and farm work is described as “low-skilled” work, despite the immense skill it often entails. The demographic shift toward Latinx-dominated rural communities presents a potential challenge as well as a many potential opportunities. On the one hand, Latinx families in rural areas might be subject to further invisibilization and social, political and economic isolation. On the other hand, important potential opportunities lie in the political and social inclusion of Latinx communities in rural areas. Meierotto and Som Castellano (2019) point to one community in rural Idaho in which the entire city council is now Latinx.<sup>4</sup> This and similar rural areas with Latinx political leadership will be important case studies in social and political change in the contemporary rural US.

Focusing on the wellbeing of agricultural workers is not only beneficial to the farmworkers, but improves the health

and well-being of rural communities as it increases the integrity and resilience of the entire food system on which all of us, in both rural and urban areas, depend. This paradigm shift—toward acknowledging farmworkers as central to any consideration of social, political, environmental and economic sustainability well-being—is essential to move forward at this critical moment of transition.

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