

International collaboration to improve safety culture and risk management among vulnerable populations in agriculture

CA16123, Safety Culture and Risk Management in Agriculture (SACURIMA)

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BACKGROUND

Agriculture and food related industries and services provide over 44 million jobs throughout the European Union (EU), including regular work for 20 million people within the agricultural sector.¹ Poland, Romania, Italy, Spain, and France lead the EU with the highest number of annual worker units in agriculture in 2017.² Regrettably, agriculture is also consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous occupational sectors in Europe, having high rates of both fatal and non-fatal occupational injuries and illnesses.³

Farm operators and agricultural employers have an obligation to ensure a safe and healthy working environment. They also have legal requirements to abide by including conducting risk assessments, consulting workers on health and safety issues, and providing appropriate job-related training.³⁻⁴ Unfortunately, there are substantial disparities in funding for prevention-focused programming to improve safety culture and risk management at both the country and local levels. The Safety Culture and Risk Management in Agriculture (SACURIMA) network was established to explore the how to improve agricultural health and safety throughout Europe thereby reducing the associated burden of work-related injuries and illnesses. As of May 2019, there were 32 countries participating in the network including some outside of the European Union including Israel, Montenegro, Republic of Serbia and Turkey. The group has five major tasks:

1. Evaluate national health and safety programs in agriculture
2. Identify safety, health, and risk management knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and priorities among farmers
3. Identify effective approaches to training and integrating vulnerable workers
4. Monitor and evaluate agriculture-related injuries and illnesses
5. Disseminate results to stakeholders

The purpose of this poster is to define vulnerable agricultural populations in Europe and what actions the group will use to improve training and integration of such workers.

METHODS

In April 2019, a SACURIMA working group met to define vulnerable agricultural populations and discuss effective approaches to training and integrating these workers. Participants presented information on vulnerable groups from within their countries as well as data from some of the other working groups.

RESULTS

As a result of this meeting, "vulnerable agricultural populations" were defined as: foreign-born farmworkers (including refugees), migrant and seasonal farmworkers, beginning farmers (those with less than five years of experience), farm families (including women, children, and older adults), and those who have physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities.

- **Foreign-born farmworkers:** Limited data exists on this population of workers; moreover, given the political instability in neighboring regions, more foreign-born workers are entering the EU as refugees as well as some without documentation. Because these workers may face communication challenges due to lack of local language proficiency, cultural misunderstandings, different work practices, and limited formal education, they may be more at risk for occupational illnesses and injuries.
- **Migrant and seasonal farmworkers:** Limited data exists on this population of workers, particularly migrant farmworkers. According to data from 2013, there were 777,910 non-regular (i.e., seasonal farmworkers) annual worker units in Europe. Spain, Italy, Romania, France, and Germany had the highest number.⁵ Migrant and seasonal farmworkers are vulnerable because of the contingent nature of the work and because such workers are not afforded the same types of protections and training as regular workers.
- **Beginning farmers:** Farmers with less than five years of experience are at greater risk for job-related injuries. Recent data from Denmark highlight that nearly 40% of farm injuries between 2011-2017 occurred to people under age 30.⁶ Limited experience, performing unfamiliar tasks, and being unaware of safety risks may increase risk among those starting out in the industry.
- **Farm families:** Of the 10.8 million farms in the EU in 2013, the vast majority (96.2%) were classified as family farms.⁷ Romania, Poland, Italy, Spain, and Greece had the greatest number of family members working on farms, but family labor accounted for over 90% of agricultural work in Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Ireland.⁵ Farm families are a vulnerable population that requires special protections for a number of reasons including the lack of required formal inspection, lack of health and safety training, and the presence of children or older adults who may have age-related differences in physical strength, speed, agility, sight, hearing, and cognitive reasoning.
- **Physically, mentally, or intellectually disabled farmers and farmworkers:** Working in agriculture (i.e., social farming) can provide a sense of fulfillment, particularly for those who have physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities; however, because of such health conditions, these individuals are vulnerable.

The working group is planning to develop a short video on best practices for training hired farmworkers including the need for training at the time of hire and at regular intervals of employment; the importance of using multiple training methodologies (including both high- and low-engaging methods); the value in engaging the end-users in the development of a training plan; and understanding the critical nature of culture, language, legal, and other logistic concerns and how they may impact the relevance of training initiatives with vulnerable worker populations. The group will also be developing a series of collaborative research initiatives to further define and describe each of the identified categories of vulnerable agricultural workers.

IMPLICATIONS

Interdisciplinary, international collaboration is critical to solving complex problems such as the high rates of occupational injuries and illnesses among vulnerable workers in global industries such as agriculture. These collaborations can provide consistency in health and safety messaging, measurement of health and safety constructs, and implementation and dissemination of health and safety programs and information. Collaborations may improve access to information, tools, and resources that may otherwise not be available. Because countries throughout the region face similar challenges, it make sense to collaborate, share, and tailor existing resources based on local needs. International collaboration is a valuable mechanism for not only for improving safety culture and risk management in agriculture, but also for strengthening research capacity and designing strategies for optimal worker health.

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