

Center for the Study of Latino Health
and Culture
Suite 200-Q
924 Westwood Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90024
uclahealth.org/ceslac

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Contact:

Adriana Valdez, (310) 794-0663, cesla@ucla.edu

COVID-19, Latino Working-Age Adults, and Citizenship

Los Angeles, California— Report no. 9 of UCLA's Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture (CESLAC).

Farm workers provide a good example of how age, citizenship, essential jobs, and COVID-19 intersect to deadly effect. We provide a demographic profile to give context showing that the largest number of Latino non-citizens in California are concentrated in the age groups 35-49 and 50-64. They are more likely to be employed as essential workers, and therefore are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19.

The average American thinks most Latinos are recently arrived immigrants. The truth is that 80% of California's 15 million Latinos are United States citizens. "The notion that Latinos are recently arrived immigrants is widely held," said David E. Hayes-Bautista, a professor in the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "But we have done the demographics of Los Angeles since its founding in 1781. The reality has been that the average Latino in this county has been born in California, ever since 1790."

The 20% of Latinos that are not yet citizens, however, are concentrated in occupations and industries that expose them to COVID-19.

During a time when we are supposed to be sheltering safely at home to avoid exposure to COVID-19, we now are being told by experts to stay inside to avoid poor air quality caused by forest fires in California and Oregon. Yet against the backdrop of a fiery orange sky, California's farm workers are still outdoors, in close proximity to one another, working long, hard hours in harmful environmental conditions.

"Even though public messaging on staying inside has been widespread, farm workers are still out in the fields, in order to provide support for their families and loved ones, risking continued exposure to both COVID and poor air quality," noted Paul Hsu, an epidemiologist in the Fielding School of Public Health at UCLA. "We have to do a better job at protecting these workers."

The coronavirus is an opportunistic predator, striking essential workers who are keeping the state functioning by doing jobs that cannot be done from home. Their work in California's food supply chain and other essential jobs needs to be supported by adequate access to PPE, testing, public health education, and health care services.

Methods. Data on COVID-19 cases, stratified by race/ethnicity and by age group, were furnished by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) on August 11, 2020. Population denominators to calculate the rate of cases per 100,000 were tabulated from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), the latest available.

About CESLAC. Since 1992, the Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture (CESLAC) of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA has provided cutting-edge, fact-based research, education, and public information about Latinos, their health, their history, and their roles in California's society and economy.

For more information, or to arrange a telephone interview with the Center's Director, David E. Hayes-Bautista, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Medicine, please contact Adriana Valdez, at (310) 794-0663 or cesla@ucla.edu.