“The Farm Has an Insatiable Appetite”
A FOOD JUSTICE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING BEGINNING FARMER STRESS

Key Findings

• Top stressors identified in the survey included having too much to do and too little time, COVID-19, not enough person power on the farm, climate change, and social justice.

• Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents reported mild to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression and 63% said the symptoms made it difficult to do work, take care of home responsibilities, or get along with people.

• Interview themes included “the stress of capitalism,” discrimination and inequitable access to resources, aids and gaps in social support, rugged individualism perpetuates systemic stressors, and heterogenous perspectives on social justice and climate change.

About this Study

Beginning farmers hold many promises for the future – they are critical for shaping resilient food systems and can be important constituents in mitigating climate change through sustainable practices. Reports indicate a prevalence of stress and adverse mental health outcomes among US farmers, yet there are gaps in the literature concerning the well-being of beginning farmers, a heterogeneous group with a growing number of women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Color) producers. The agricultural industry has a legacy of systemic oppression and exploitation of marginalized communities. Examples of systemic oppression include enslavement of Africans as part of the transatlantic slave trade, land theft from Indigenous peoples, and institutional discrimination against Black, Latine, and women farmers. It is
important to understand the unique needs of an emerging, more diverse generation of farmers, especially as discrimination is associated with stress and poor mental health outcomes. Farmer stress, equity issues, and start-up barriers are pertinent in the US Midwest, a highly productive agricultural region significant for local and global economies.

In this community-engaged, mixed methods research project, we utilized a food justice framework to understand systemic stressors and coping strategies among Midwestern beginning farmers. Food justice is a food system objective and a collection of transformative practices aimed at rectifying structural inequalities. Food justice occurs when the benefits and hazards of food production, distribution, and access are experienced equally. In collaboration with the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA), beginning farmers in the Midwest were recruited using purposive sampling to participate in quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews. The survey (n = 62) included measures of farm stress, mental health supports, and farm characteristics, the Patient Health Questionnaire-4, and sociodemographic information. Interviews (n = 20) were conducted to establish a deeper understanding of stress and mental health experiences. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

We found high levels of stress and anxiety and depression symptom burden in our sample. While not unique to beginning farmers, stress becomes compounded among this group due to a layering of stressors related to social position. Top stressors identified in the survey included having too much to do and too little time, COVID-19, not enough person power on the farm, climate change, and social justice. Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents reported mild to severe symptom burden of anxiety or depression and 63% said the symptoms made it difficult to do work, take care of home responsibilities, or get along with people. Five qualitative themes emerged, including the stress of capitalism, discrimination and inequitable access to resources, aids and gaps in social support, rugged individualism perpetuates systemic stressors, and heterogeneous perspectives on social justice and climate change. Four transformative food justice practices inform our implications: acknowledge that oppression occurs, understand and heal historical and collective trauma enacted by structural power, embody an intersectional approach, and recognize that oppression and resistance coincide. Our results emphasize an urgency for systemic change and structural support for beginning farmers.

As the world faces unprecedented social and environmental crises including climate change, food insecurity, and widespread inequalities, the field of social work is called to address social and environmental injustices. The systemic issues that farmers face endanger community food security and negatively impact marginalized communities, which ought to concern social workers. Social workers must advocate for systems-level change, including comprehensive health insurance, funding for rural programming, and initiatives to enhance social support and lessen the social stigma around mental health care.

**Conclusion**

Results from our survey and interviews reveal that the “insatiable appetite” of the farm is exacerbated by the stress of capitalism, discrimination in access to resources, rugged individualism, and challenges with social support. The heterogeneity of climate change and social justice perspectives calls for future research in these key areas as they may potentially aggravate other stressors beginning farmers already face. Future research should also investigate the impact of systems-level strategies to shape support for beginning farmers.
About the researchers

Fiona Doherty is a Ph.D. Student at The Ohio State University College of Social Work with research experience in the nexus of social justice, sustainable food systems, and climate change. Rachel Tayse is the Executive Director of the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) with expertise as a community organizer, beginning farmer, and food system consultant in the Greater Ohio Region. Dr. Michelle Kaiser is an Associate Professor in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University with expertise in community-engaged research and community food security. Dr. Smitha Rao is an Assistant Professor in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University with expertise in climate and environmental justice, and anti-oppression work.

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