Comparative Food Insecurities: Farmworker Perception of How the Quality and Quantity of Food Changes with Migration

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Abstract

Studies have found that farmworkers in U.S. agriculture report high rates of food insecurity. Yet scholars also point to hunger as the reason behind why farmworkers left their homes to come to the U.S. Thus, a binational comparison of food insecurity is needed. This study examines access to food prior to and after migration to California. Interviews with 40 farmworker households reveal that while respondents experienced more hunger in their home communities than they do in the U.S., the quality of food has decreased with migration. Respondents brought up the high quality of fresh, flavourful, organic food they grew themselves through natural methods. When the harvest ran out, without money to buy food, they experienced severe hunger. Some contrasted that to the abundance of food post-migration, and others discussed seasonal hunger during months when there is less work, yet all pointed to the low quality of food they have access to at U.S. grocery stores. With migration, respondents lost access to pesticide-free food. Rates of farmworker food insecurity miss the fact that even those who are considered food secure are not eating the quality of food they desire. A comparative perspective reveals the transformation of insecurity from insufficient amounts of fresh and natural food to increased consumption of food laden with chemicals. In neither context do the workers who harvest food for others have enough access to what they wish to be eating.

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Introduction

Farmworker food insecurity is an important topic to explore because of the irony associated with the fact that the people who labour in the fields to pick the produce that feeds others, are themselves often suffering from the absence of sufficient food. While farmworkers are often examined by scholars as *producers* in the food system, they are also *consumers*. Without wishing to "deemphasize the importance of focusing on the embodied forms of structural vulnerability migrants endure as producers in the industrial food system", it is also imperative to balance that literature by examining their experiences "at the other end of this spectrum" (Carney, 2015: 12) in the realm of eating.

Existing scholarship points to high rates of food insecurity among farmworkers in the U.S (Weigel et al., 2007; Wirth, Strochlic, and Getz, 2007; Kresge and Eastman, 2010; Castañeda et al., 2019). It also points to lack of access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food because of economic and political marginalization (Borre, Ertle, and Graff, 2010; Minkoff-Zern, 2014a; Mares, 2019). In addition, scholars note that many farmworkers in the U.S. are economic refugees, fleeing starvation (López, 2007; Stephen, 2007; Mares, 2019). Thus, more scholarly attention needs to be paid to binational comparisons of food access. Studies have shown food insecurity on both sides of the border, but a direct comparison of how farmworkers perceive their access to food prior to and after migration is absent from the conversation.

Forty farmworker families in Oxnard, California, were interviewed about the advantages and disadvantages of access to food in both contexts. These interviews reveal the paradox of access to high quality food alongside hunger and starvation, and subsequent access to improved quantity but insufficient quality of food. Respondents shed light on the qualities of food from home that they miss, and note the difference in taste between the freshly harvested, freshly slaughtered, local and organic food from home, and the second-class global, industrial, conventional food they are relegated to at discount grocery stores in the U.S. This study reveals the tension between two notions of food access: sufficient quantity and preferred quality. Conditions of poverty on both sides of the border create different types of food insecurities, but in neither context do farmworkers have sufficient quantities of quality food.

Prior to migration, farmworker respondents had access to fresh, local, flavourful, organic produce that they grew themselves. However, lacking structural resources like irrigation water, they were unable to feed themselves all year round. In the absence of employment opportunities to earn money to buy food, farmworkers faced severe hunger when their harvests ran out. Now, post-migration, while they are able to earn money to fill their stomachs more than before, the type of food they have access to is not the type of food they wish to be eating. Previous studies on farmworker access to food highlight high rates of food insecurity, but by focusing on amount of food, they miss the necessary component of preferred quality. As low-income labourers, the food they can afford at grocery stores lacks flavour and freshness. They value local and organic food because they remember what it tastes like from home. Therefore, efforts to improve farmworkers' access to food should focus on improving quality and not just increasing quantity.

Inadequate access to food on both sides of the border

Farmworker food insecurity

For many farmworkers, hunger is the driving force that led them to cross the border to find work in the United States (Mares, 2019). In the Mexican countryside, migration is the alternative to starvation (López, 2007). Farmworkers refer to this as *aguantando hambre*, enduring hunger (López, 2007), and through the phrase '*Allá no tenemos nada que comer*: back there we had nothing to eat' (Carney, 2015; Carney, 2017). Yet, once they arrive in the United States, farmworkers continue to face insufficient access to food (López, 2007), as "those who produce our nation's food are among the most likely to be hungry" (Brown and Getz, 2011: 121). Farmworkers face a 'double burden' of harsh working and living conditions on the one hand, and food insecurity on the other (Castañeda et al., 2019).

Rates of farmworker food insecurity are often measured using the 18-item USDA Household Food Security Survey. Utilizing this method results in a wide range of percentages. Along the U.S.-Mexico border, 87% (Castañeda et al., 2019) and 82% (Weigel et al., 2007) of farmworker respondents were food insecure, with 49% experiencing hunger (Weigel et al., 2007). In North Carolina, 64% (Borre et al., 2010) and 61% (Pulgar et al., 2016) of farmworker families experienced food insecurity, with 35% experiencing hunger (Borre et al., 2010). In Idaho, half of respondents were food insecure (Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2020). In California, 66% of respondents in Salinas were food insecure (Kresge and Eastman, 2010), while 47% of farmworker respondents near Sacramento sometimes or frequently run out of food without money to buy more (Wadsworth, Rittenhouse, and Cain, 2016), and 45% of respondents in Fresno were food insecure, with only 11% experiencing hunger (Wirth et al., 2007). In another California study, among indigenous farmworkers on the Central Coast, 100% reported food insecurity with hunger (Minkoff-Zern, 2014a). Thus, rates of food insecurity and hunger reported in these studies vary substantially, which raises questions as to the survey's reliability as an indicator.

Standardized measurements of food insecurity are most useful when they are comparative. Wirth et al. (2007) found that documentation status is correlated with food insecurity. Among documented farmworkers in the study, 34% were food insecure, while 55% of undocumented farmworkers were food insecure. This overlaps with indigeneity, as 98% of indigenous Mexican respondents in their study were undocumented. Food insecurity has also been found to vary by season and presence of children in the household. For households with children, 56% faced food insecurity compared to 36% of households without children (Quandt et al., 2004). Monthly income among farmworker respondents averaged $492 in winter and $781 in summer (Wirth et al., 2007).

Farmworkers continue to face food insecurity in the United States due to low wages and seasonal unemployment. This is compounded by the lack of spatial access to food in some rural areas (Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2019; Mares, 2019; Guzmán and Medieros, 2020). Distance to the supermarket constrains access to food among farmworkers in Idaho, as they have very little time to travel there when working 12-hour days, 7 days a week (Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2020). Once groceries are procured, farmworkers face an additional dilemma of cooking space. Crowded living situations and inadequate kitchen space, including lack of reliable electrical circuits to plug in kitchen appliances, also limit their ability to prepare food (Quandt et al., 2014; Minkoff-Zern, 2014c; Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2020).

Difficulties obtaining food are exacerbated by lack of access to food assistance services. Undocumented farmworkers are ineligible for public programmes such as food stamps (Brown and Getz, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, 2014a; Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2019). In addition, they do not take advantage of the safety net programmes for which they do qualify, such as WIC for their citizen children, because they fear it will jeopardize future chances of gaining citizenship and because they are afraid of being deported if they identify themselves to government officials (Minkoff-Zern, 2014a; Carney, 2015). Language barriers further erode access to safety net programmes, because even if staff members are bilingual, some indigenous farmworkers do not speak Spanish (Minkoff-Zern, 2014a). Therefore, food assistance programmes often do not reach the undocumented indigenous farmworkers who experience the most food insecurity.

Even when farmworkers do access food assistance programmes, the experience is often not culturally appropriate. Minkoff-Zern (2014a) found not only that respondents felt powerless when accepting charity, but also that they were not accustomed to the donated food they received from food banks, which was often old or expired, and never fresh. It is therefore important to consider the quality and not only the quantity of food to which farmworkers have access. Food insecurity rates do not reveal the types of food to which respondents have access, and whether it is of preferred quality.

Preferred quality of foods

Food insecurity has been defined as uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods due to limited financial

resources (Weigel et al., 2007). According to Mares (2019), the way food insecurity is measured keeps the food insecurities that farmworkers experience hidden. It does not capture the qualitative dimensions of food access, such as the cultural relevance of foods. She points out that "Numbers alone do not account for the embodied and emotional consequences of going without *meaningful* food" (p. 59, emphasis added). The farmworkers in her study faced significant challenges accessing "culturally familiar foods", such as *chiles* and herbs like *epazote*. Other respondents have said that vegetables they were used to eating in Mexico, such as *verdolaga*, otherwise known as purslane or Mexican parsley, are difficult to find in the U.S (Wirth et al., 2007). *Papalo*, *quintonil*, *herba mora*, and *quilites* are other crops that hold significant cultural importance to farmworkers from Oaxaca (Minkoff-Zern, 2014b). Not only is it difficult to find traditional foods in stores in the U.S, but crops that could be grown outside their homes in yards in Oaxaca are expensive to buy when located at stores post-migration (Guarnaccia et al., 2012).

Besides less access to traditional leafy greens, another dietary change post-migration is increased consumption of meat. Due to financial constraints, it was uncommon to eat meat back in their hometowns. Across numerous studies, farmworkers who have migrated to the U.S. reported eating meat much more frequently than before (Borre et al., 2010; Guarnaccia et al., 2012; Mares, 2019). However, the meat they eat is of poorer quality. Back in Mexico, the meat would be fresh, because they would slaughter the animals themselves (Borre et al., 2010). Farmworkers distrust the meat they have access to in the U.S. because it comes wrapped in plastic, and they do not know how fresh it is (Borre et al., 2010; Guarnaccia et al., 2012).

Studies of farmworkers' dietary changes point to increased consumption of unhealthy foods (Wirth et al., 2007; Borre et al., 2010; Minkoff-Zern, 2014b). Respondents reported that their diets post-migration were made up of more processed foods. "They prioritized purchasing high calorie foods that would keep their families satiated", explains Minkoff-Zern (2014a: 215), "and they could no longer afford nutrient-rich, yet calorie-poor fruits and vegetables". Her study shows that farmworkers' diets in rural Mexico consisted of more vegetables than they do in the U.S.

Indeed, Wadsworth et al. (2016) found that if money was not an object, farmworker respondents would purchase more fresh fruits, such as strawberries, mangos, pineapple, and melon. Kresge and Eastman (2010) found that 93% of farmworker participants would like to eat more fruits and vegetables than they currently do, and 96% of participants expressed a strong preference for eating natural or organic foods if they were more accessible. All of the participants in Minkoff-Zern's (2014a) study stated that they preferred to consume organic, but that they were unable to afford it in the U.S. The food they grew themselves prior to migration was grown without pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, whereas produce purchased at grocery stores, like cilantro for example, "has another flavour" because it is grown with chemicals.

The foods that farmworker respondents in these studies miss from their previous diets are fresh, natural, organic, nutritious, and culturally appropriate herbs and vegetables. This does not come through in standardized rates of food insecurity, which capture respondent perceptions about adequate amount of food, but not preferred quality. Thus, more open-ended research on farmworker access to food is needed to understand the binational experience of how the quality and quantity of food changes with migration.

I found that farmworkers face food insecurities on both sides of the border, but the nature of the insecurity is different. Prior to migration, they may not have had enough to eat, but the type of food they did eat was fresh, natural, locally grown, organic, and flavourful. Now, they only have access to conventional industrial grocery store products. While they may be able to obtain more food after migrating to the U.S., it is not the food they wish to be eating. Mares (2019: 68) refers to this as "the continuation of, yet differentiation between, the food insecurities that migrant workers confronted in their countries of origin and the insecurities they experience" in the U.S. They are food insecure in both contexts, but the type of insecurity changes.

My study reveals the tension between two notions of food access: having access to sufficient quantity of food,

and having access to preferred quality of food. It is essential to have both, yet that is not the case for the farmworkers who harvest fruits and vegetables on the California coast, as they have only one without the other.

Methods

Data on how farmworker access to food changes with migration were collected between September 2017 and April 2019. In total, 40 farmworker families were interviewed. Sometimes I interviewed spouses together, and sometimes I interviewed only one adult. I recruited farmworkers to be in my study by walking through residential neighbourhoods, greeting passers-by, and asking if they met the qualifications and would like to participate in the study. After obtaining informed consent, I audio-recorded interviews and transcribed the recordings in Spanish first, before translating them into English. The interview data analysed for this article are part of a larger research project on field workers' experiences harvesting on organic and conventional farms (Soper, 2020; Soper, 2021). My interview guide consisted of questions on working conditions first and consumption of food second. Therefore, while the larger project is based on interviews with 65 farmworkers, I carried out the second half of the interview with only 40 households. All respondents have been given pseudonyms. To maintain anonymity, I did not ask for any identifiable information, including name.

This research took place in the town of Oxnard, which is located in Ventura County, an agricultural and suburban county located on the Central Coast of California, between Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. Ventura County specializes in various crops, including citrus, avocados, celery, and bell pepper, but all of the respondents in this study have predominantly worked in strawberry, raspberry, and leafy green production.

The majority of farmworkers in this study are indigenous Mixteco-speakers from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Indigenous farmworkers in California are concentrated more on the Central Coast than the Central Valley, and they come from a specific region of western Oaxaca, where it borders the states of Guerrero and Puebla (Mines, Nichols, and Runsten, 2010). My sample is roughly half male and half female. Increasingly, there has been a trend towards the feminization of agriculture, as more immigrant women are employed as field workers (Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2019). In addition, there has been a shift away from the migratory nature of farm work that follows the harvest up and down the region, towards farmworkers settling long-term in rural communities (Meierotto and Som Castellano, 2020). That is the case with these respondents as well, as the vast majority are parents, raising their children in the area, and sending them to school year-round. Some respondents migrate north during the summer, but others stay in Oxnard to hold on to their rental and not have to find a new place to live when they return at the beginning of the school year.

Prior research on farmworkers in Oxnard found that 78% of respondents were food insecure, in one study (Friesen and Humel, 2013), and 59% were food insecure, in another (Maxwell et al., 2015). Friesen and Humel (2013) used the USDA Food Security 6-question module, including the questions: "in the last 12 months did you or your family eat less than you needed to because you didn't have enough money to buy food?" and "in the last 12 months were you hungry or didn't eat because you didn't have money to buy food?". Maxwell et al. (2015) asked a yes or no question on whether the respondent's family had enough to eat or not.

To gather data on food consumption, I asked a few open-ended questions, rather than using the standardized questionnaire. After finishing the first section of the interview guide about working conditions, I asked respondents where they were from, and then asked: "How is the food from there, how is it different than the food from here, and which is better?" After asking respondents to describe the food they eat on both sides of the border, I then asked about "*hambre*" and whether, in both contexts, there is enough food to "*llenar el estómago*".

Respondents began by describing the high-quality food they ate back home and how much better it is compared to the food they eat now. They stated that food back home was better because it was natural, organic, fresh, and recently harvested or slaughtered from their own farm. They typically did not respond by talking

about lack of food. Only when I followed up with questions about sufficient quantities of food and whether they had ever faced hunger, did they open up about not having enough to eat. Although they unanimously pointed to facing more hunger back home than they do in California, some reported seasonal hunger in the U.S., while others claimed they have enough to eat all year round. There was variation with regard to having sufficient quantity of food post-migration, but all wished they had access to better quality food, particularly chemical-free food. All respondents had more access to organic food back home than they do in California.

Findings

Better quality food in Mexico

Respondents considered the food they ate in Southern Mexico to be of better quality than the food they eat on the Central Coast. In particular, they noted that food was more natural, fresh, and organic where they came from, because they grew it themselves and knew what went into it. "The vegetables are fresher," explained Juan; if they wanted to eat a tomato "we grab it and prepare it." Dario told me food was better back home because they knew where it came from: "It's better because the food is made by you; you prepare and harvest it with your own hands. And here, you go shopping, you don't know if it's good or not."

In contrast to the natural and organic food from home, respondents pointed to the food they eat in California as *puro químico*, "pure chemicals". Claudio, when answering the question about differences between food at home and in the U.S., said: "It's very different, because we know the food from here is pure chemicals. What we're eating is pure chemicals. The lettuce, all of the vegetables, are pure chemicals. And in Oaxaca, no. Over there it's natural, pure rainwater. No chemical is applied. And so it's more organic over there, it's healthier."

Hugo told me that they eat the same foods in California as they did back home; the only difference is that there, "what one eats is what they plant on their own land. Corn, beans, melon, what the land can produce over there", whereas in California the food is pure chemicals, "*aquí es puro químico*". Ramón explained that "food in Mexico is delicious. It is *puro orgánico* because fertilizer is not used." Victor said that back home where they planted corn and herbs, they did not spray any chemicals, "all of it is natural". Sergio insisted that food from home was better because "that type of food is one hundred percent organic. Pure soil, totally organic, none of it was conventional."

Respondents referred not only to crops as more natural, fresh, and organic, they also spoke that way about livestock. According to Natalia, "all types of meat – chicken, steak, all of it – contains chemicals, and there no, they grow with only pastures, all organic, nothing is put in them. Back there it is more organic, and here no." Carmen commented that food was better in Mexico because meat did not come with injections; it was fresher than in the U.S. "*La carne aquí es pura congelada*": meat here is all frozen, whereas at home it is recently slaughtered.

Raúl talked about how the livestock and chickens are *recién matados*, "recently slaughtered" from their own ranch, "and here we do not know how long since they were slaughtered, we do not know how long they are refrigerated, how many months". Alma complained that everything in the U.S. was store bought, like eggs, whereas back home everything came from their own farm: "meat comes from your own animals that you slaughter: chicken, pigs, cows". Food there was better quality because "*todo es recién, no está congelado*", everything is recent, not frozen. Fausto emphasized how meat in the U.S. spends so much time in the refrigerator. In contrast, in Mexico "you have your animals, you kill them [motions with his hands], and the meat is better."

When comparing food from home to food in the U.S., respondents also pointed to a difference in taste. Saúl told me there was "more flavour there – recently slaughtered, recently made – and here no, it spends so much time in the refrigerator". "All the food is fresh, and here it spends too much time in the refrigerator", echoed Fausto: "food here doesn't have flavour". Juliana explained that "over there, everything is fresh. The vegetables are fresh, the meat too. They do not use the refrigerator much." Blanca said, "there it's better because the meat is recent, not frozen. The vegetables too, they have a different flavour."

Vegetables, fruits and grains from back home include the traditional *milpa* of corn, beans, and squash, as well as

rice, lentils, sweet potato, green beans, chili, radish, onions, tomato, cucumber, cilantro, peaches, melon, nopales, prickly pear, chayote, chilacayotes, and guaje. "Guaje has a long vein like this, and you open it – that's what we ate a lot of," Claudio reminisced, adding "over there we prepared beans in different ways; you can grind it, put a little chili into it. It's so delicious! *Que sabroso sale. Bien sabrosa sale la comida*".

Food back home had better flavour, according to respondents, not only because of how it was grown, but also how it was prepared. Claudio blushed with pride as he relayed his food memories from Oaxaca, especially eating warm tortillas, *hecho de mano*, cooked over a wood stove, not gas. Hugo and Ramón also emphasized how much better tortillas were back home because they were handmade. Paloma reported that at home beans were cooked daily, *recién cociditos*, whereas in the U.S. she cooks them only once every eight days and keeps them in the refrigerator. Back home "*es más sabrosa*", it's tastier, she said. She was very nostalgic listing all the foods she ate back home, saying they were *todos sanitos*, all healthy.

Respondents talked with pride about how delicious food from home was because it all came from their surroundings and was grown naturally without external inputs, like pesticides, fertilizers, or irrigation. However, this initial praise eventually unfolded to reveal inconsistent access to food because of unpredictable weather patterns and harvests that ran out.

Lack of irrigation

While respondents pointed to how natural their agriculture was, in that it relied exclusively on rainwater, they also frequently mentioned waiting for rain before they could plant. Sarita said that where she came from, food was *pura orgánica*. "*Casi no hay convencional*", there is hardly any conventional farming, she explained. If somebody wants to eat a tomato, they go and pick it because it's not sprayed with anything. Then she went on to explain that they did not have access to irrigation, only to rainwater. "God willing", if it rains, they have corn, otherwise not. Facundo said there was hardly any water in his home community; it was very dry. They had to wait for rainy weather, "*tiempo de lluvia*", in order to plant, and only grew a little corn. Claudio had very little land and it was not irrigated, so they could only plant when it rained. "*Cuando no llueve, no hay nada*", he continued: "when it doesn't rain, there's nothing".

Felipe reminisced fondly about the herbs they would eat back home, but only when it rained, he clarified, because there was no irrigation. There were difficult times when it did not rain. "If it rained well, there was food. But if not, there was not." The *milpa* did not produce enough to feed the whole family, Sofia added. Only when it rained well did corn and beans grow, but sometimes it did not rain at all, and sometimes it hailed. Then they would lose everything. Tomás told me that back home they planted only corn and beans, and only during the rainy season. "There was not much water back home", he explained, "and not much food. Only a little food. Sometimes there was, and sometimes there wasn't. Sometimes all we had was tortilla. And there was no money to buy food."

As the respondents praised the better flavour of food grown back home, they also noted that crops took a long time to grow, and that yields were small, resulting in less food to eat. Agustín started by saying that back home all the food was better because it was natural. But then he talked about how there was no fertilizer to apply, and so not enough food was produced: "*casi no da tanto*", it hardly yields much. Dulce said everything she ate back home was organic. It also had a sweeter taste (*más dulce)* and had more vitamins *(más vitamina)*. However, crops took longer to grow back home, she explained; it could take as long as a year, whereas in the fields of California, crops grow much quicker. Paloma told me that *elotes,* corn on the cob, were very good and sweet, *bien dulces*; however, they were quite small. Same with the squash; they did not grow big, but they were very tasty, *bien sabrosa*. She did not even need to add sugar, like she does in the U.S., since the squash was less bitter.

Lidia said that the flavour of food was better back home because everything was organic, whereas in California it was all chemical: "*porque todo allá es orgánico. Aquí es puro químico*". They raised chickens themselves,

feeding them organic corn, and it was very tasty. But then she went on to explain that everything was organic because they did not have money to buy fertilizer or chemical inputs: "*allá no hay dinero para ir comprar abono, no hay dinero para comprar químicos*". Growing without fertilizer was not necessarily a choice, it was their only option.

Calixta talked about how food from home was so tasty because the tortilla was *hecho de mano* over a word-burning stove. But then she went on to explain how sometimes the corn and beans ran out, and she remembers going to bed hungry. "*Si no llueve, no hay maíz*", if it does not rain, there is no corn. Where she grew up, it was very poor because they did not have water; they would always be waiting for the rain, "*esperando la lluvia*". Without access to irrigation or other inputs, yields were low and unreliable. The fresh, organic, natural, and flavourful food from home was a double-edged sword, in that it was tasty but did not last long.

Hunger when the harvest ran out

Initially, Magdalena reminisced about how food from home contained no chemicals; it was all natural, all organic ("*nada de químico, todo natural, todo orgánico*"). When it rained, vegetables and herbs would grow between the rows of corn and beans in their *milpa*, and they had *quelite, elijote*, cilantro, and radish to eat. Overall, though, her childhood was difficult, and oftentimes she went to bed hungry. "*Nosotros batallamos mucho.* We struggled a lot when it came to food. We did not have enough to eat, so we became accustomed to not eating much. We would put a little salt on a tortilla with chili, and that is what we ate. With a glass of water." Once in a while they could afford to buy a roll of bread, and she and her six brothers and sisters would pass it around taking one bite each, "*un bocadito de pan a cada quien*". Magdalena became very emotional when revealing her painful memories of childhood hunger. "*No había nada de comer. Teníamos muchísima, muchísima hambre*", she cried. "There was nothing to eat. We were very hungry."

Like the others, Sofia also mentioned how food back home was better because it was "*pura comida natural, sin químico*", purely natural food, without chemicals. But, on the other hand, she continued, "*Allá no hay dinero para comer*", there is no money for food back home. In the U.S., "there is more work, there is more money". Dora concurred that there was no money to buy food, "*no tenia dinero para comprar comida*". Corn and beans were all they had to eat. Pablo told me that they would eat corn, beans, and squash from their *milpa* "*para sobrevivir*", to survive. I asked if there was a necessity to buy food, and he replied, "yes there was necessity, but there was no money".

Juan explained that they did not have access to irrigation, so they planted only during the rainy season, *por temporada de lluvia*, and harvested only once a year. "*Lo que sale es lo que comemos*": they ate only what they harvested because there was no money to buy more food. "*Por eso tenemos que buscar oportunidades para trabajar porque allí no hay trabajo*", said Juan, "that is why we have to look for opportunities to work, because there is no work back home". Pancho said he sometimes experienced hunger, when their crops ran out and there was no money to buy food. "It depends on whether a person has land, what area they're in, if there's rain"; that will determine whether the food will last or not. Then he added that he never faces hunger in California, because there is always enough work.

I asked Marisol if food was better or worse in Mexico, and she said it was better there because people farmed organically. But then she went on to explain that "life was very difficult. That is why we came here for work." Thus, while food was clearly better quality back in Mexico, there was not a sufficient amount of food and hunger was rampant. All respondents reported that they faced less access to food back home than they do in California.

"Which is better, food in Guerrero, or here?", I asked Alma. "There", she replied, "but back home there's not as much possibility, there's not as much work, there's not enough for one to eat well. There are times when there is something to eat, and there days when there is not. *Hay días que no hay para comer.*" Martina said it was a struggle to find enough food to eat. "If we had some beans, we would save them, eating little by little."

"*Batalla mucho para conseguir comida*", she continued; "we struggled a lot to obtain food." "Was there sufficient food to fill your stomach?", I asked, to which Lidia replied "No! The truth, sincerely, no. *Allá comemos pobre*. There we ate poorly. *Hay más comida aquí que allá. Allí no hay mucho*. There is more food here than there. Back home there is not much." Occasionally they would have enough money to buy a popsicle, but it would be one popsicle that she would have to share will all her siblings.

Blanca stated that there was much more hunger back home because of the lack of work, "*la falta de trabajo*". There was no money to buy food, and here, there is more work and more food. Pedro admitted that they were barely surviving back home, because there was hardly any work and the wages were low. "*Pagan poquito*", Armando agreed. The minimum wage of 100 pesos a day buys very little, only a bit of milk or a bit of meat, that is all, and when it ran out, he was left needing more to eat. By contrast, in the U.S., with 100 dollars, what they make in a day with minimum wage, one can buy plenty of food, *bastante comida*.

Claudio told me he faced hunger back home because food was so expensive compared to what they could earn. What they had to eat was tortilla, beans, and squash: "that's it. *Eso no mas*." Sometimes they were able to afford meat, but only occasionally, not as often as they would like, because a kilo of meat costs 80 pesos, "almost a day's work!" Sergio said the food they had back home was not enough, *no alcanza*. "People travel far to find work to earn enough money to buy food. That is life. *Así es la vida*", he said matter-of-factly. "*De la pobreza, venimos por acá*. We came here because of poverty."

The corn harvest takes place from October to December, Tulio explained, but by summer it is difficult to secure food to eat. When the harvest runs out, they must buy corn, but it is a two-hour drive to the nearest city, and they do not have a car. Saúl said the months back home that were most difficult to eat were September through October, right before harvest, when the previous year's harvest had run out. There was more hunger back home, "because the minimum salary is not enough, and here it is; here there's lots of work, and more work means more money." According to Fatima, there was hunger all year long, and there was no money to buy food. "All we had was tortilla with a little egg, a little salsa, that was it. Here there is everything. *Aquí hay todo*."

Alviña told me about the hunger she faced back home: "sometimes there's nothing to eat because there's no work. That is why we came to work here, to be able to take care of our families back home. And here we earn enough to be able to live and send money back to my family over there." Ramón told me how he grew up poor, and on some days there was no food to eat. Whereas here, *comimos bien*, we eat well. "We didn't earn there what we earn here, and the money didn't go far enough. That's why we continue in this country. Because there is enough to eat. *Porque de comer sí hay*."

Food insecurity on the Central Coast

As indicated above in respondents' comparisons between access to food back home and access in the U.S., they clearly experienced more hunger prior to migration. Some respondents reported having enough to eat all year long on the Central Coast, while some reported seasonal hunger during the winter months when there is less work. While experiences of hunger in the U.S. varied among farmworker respondents, all reported less access to natural, fresh, and organic food post-migration.

Juliana said that in Oxnard, when they work, they have enough money to buy whatever they want. But back home it was different, they did not have enough. "*Aunque sea mejor la comida, no tenemos para comprarlo*" she explained, "even though the food was better, we did not have [enough money] to buy it." When I asked Sarita if there was sufficient food to eat in Mexico, she replied, "truthfully, no. There was not enough to eat. Because back home, we always lacked money." When I asked the same question about the U.S., she replied "here there is almost never hunger because one is always working". Natalia said back home they lacked money to buy food because there was no work, whereas "here, one eats whatever one wants because there is work". I asked if they ever lacked money to buy food in Oxnard, to which she replied: "*No, aquí no nos hace falta en*

dinero, siempre he tenido para comprar comida. No, here we never lack money; we have always had enough to buy food."

Felipe lamented that back home they would go to the market and see all this beautiful fruit, and the kids would ask for it, but there would be no money to buy it. They would worry so much about money, but here, Felipe is confident that there is always enough money for food: "The kids ask for fruit, for candy, and I can get it for them, because we're not afraid of spending money, because we're working and every week a new cheque arrives." Tomás assured me there was enough to eat in California, "*Si, hay suficiente comida*. Here there is work." Juliana also emphasized how she has access to a sufficient amount of food here: *hay suficiente, hay bastante*. Blanca likewise answered that there was "always a sufficient amount, all year long". Paloma told me that there was always enough to eat in California: "We want for nothing. Thank God, we don't lack food. That's why we're here, getting paid, because we don't lack anything."

Armando said that 15-20 years ago in Oxnard, they faced seasonal food insecurity because there was no winter strawberry harvest, there was no raspberry production, but today there is work all year round. His family of four can spend $200 on groceries: "we can buy juice, milk, eggs, meat, everything we need". Alviña explained that there were previously some months without enough money to buy food; when the strawberry harvest ended, there were two or three months without work, when there was no income to buy food or send money back to family in Mexico. But now that she works in the vegetable harvest, she is employed all year long, and there is always income to buy what they need for the house.

Whereas the above respondents claimed that seasonal food insecurity was behind them, others still experienced hunger. "There is hunger here too, there is suffering. But here there is a little less", Martina said. "Here, it's partly good, partly bad. We still struggle a lot. You have to work all day to have enough food. If there is no work, there is no food", she explained. "We still face hunger here", Fausto told me. After they pay the rent, sometimes there is not enough money left over for food.

On the Central Coast, rents are high. Many respondents pointed to rent as a financial burden, and one they were not used to. In Mexico, Saúl told me, they did not have to pay rent for their house, and here they have to pay for food and rent, everything. Dora also mentioned having to pay rent here, but not in Mexico. Sergio lives in a three-bedroom apartment, which costs $1800 per month in rent, so his family rents only one room, and pays $600 a month. Ramón also pays $600-700 in rent for one room.

Respondents still face months of the year when there is not enough income to cover all their costs. Augustín told me that December is the most difficult time of the year because work runs out and there are no more paycheques. After they pay rent, "*no alcanza el dinero*", there is not enough money left. January is also tough, but by February there are strawberries to harvest. In March, April, May, and June there is the most work, then in July it starts to slow down, and by September there is hardly any, explained Claudio. Alma said that sometimes there is good work, and sometimes not. "Right now, in this season, it's good, we have food to eat", she told me during an interview in April, which is peak strawberry harvest season. December and the first part of January are when it is most difficult, she explained. All year long is difficult, said Fatima, but from September to Christmas is the hardest.

Most respondents pointed to the winter months as the time of year they worked fewer hours, or not at all. Gloria said that while there is work all year round, sometimes there is less of it, and their paycheques come out small. November, December, and January are hardest. She always makes sure to buy eggs, beans, and oil. If there is enough money, she buys meat and vegetables, but not always. Sergio was clear that there is more access to food in California than back home, but still admitted there are difficult months. During the summer they save as much as they can so that they can afford to buy food in the winter months when their paycheques are smaller and when there are more family expenses.

There are good times, and difficult times, Lidia told me. When there is good work, they earn enough to survive. But there are also bad times, when there is not much work, and they are let go early in the day. For example, when it rains, they are not allowed to work in the fields because of the mud. "It's difficult but we can't avoid it because that's nature," she explained. Marisol also pointed to rainy weather as the time when it is most difficult to feed her family. "They don't let you work because of all the accidents", she explained, and as a result she does not have enough money when she goes grocery shopping. Saúl also said December was the most difficult month to find enough to eat, because of the rain and loss of work. Facundo works harvesting vegetables, so there is production all year long, but he still faces food insecurity from October to February because he works fewer hours when it rains. Thus, in both contexts, much of their livelihood and sustenance is based on weather patterns: back home, they wait for rain in order to plant, and here, during the rainy season there is less work, and therefore smaller paycheques.

When it rains, sometimes they work only two days a week, and bring home a cheque of only $80, Ramón explains: "Obviously that is not going to reach, but then the work starts back up again." December, January, and February are the most difficult months, Dulce and Magdalena agreed, because there is less work, and they work fewer than eight hours a day. When there is less work, and they are only making $100 or $200 a month, it is a struggle to buy food.

"When I'm working, anything that I want to eat, I have the money, so I eat it", explained Magdalena. "Thank God, when there is work, we don't lack anything. When I have the urge to eat something, I go to the store and buy it." She contrasted this to growing up hungry, and said what a shame it was that her daughters sometimes took a bite of food and threw the rest away. There is so much food in the U.S. that people take it for granted, felt Magdalena. Claudio said that while they might not be able to buy everything they want, he does not experience hunger. They can afford eggs, beans, rice, and milk; and if there is a little more work, they can buy other things too. He explained that while it was possible to experience hunger in California as well, occasionally, when there was no work, back in Oaxaca there was never work, and there was always hunger.

Less access to organic

While some respondents pointed to seasonal food insecurity in Oxnard, others said there was enough income all year round to afford groceries. Yet even those with enough food to eat still lacked access to the same quality of food they ate back home. Pancho said he does not eat organic food in California "*por el precio*", because of the price. "The price is a little bit higher," he explained. The same went for Juan, who does not buy organic food "because organic costs more". "It is more expensive," Hugo said, and Felipe added, "it is too expensive". Tomás said he does not eat organic "because organic is expensive, and we earn little". "We go with what is cheapest", explained Sofía. Alviña said: "We eat what is cheapest, and that is conventional, because organic always has a higher price."

Few respondents reported being able to afford organic food, and those who did, only purchased organic for a small portion of their groceries. "On very rare occasions have we bought organic", said Claudio, "because organic is more expensive, it has another price, and we earn very little, very little money." "Organic costs a little more", explained Lidia. If the organic option was only 10 cents more than the conventional one, she said she would choose it, but if it was $1 more, then she would choose the conventional food. "Very infrequently do I go for organic", said Lidia. Once in a while Gloria will buy organic vegetables and tomatoes, but only sometimes because they are more expensive. Juliana estimated that 10% of the fruits and vegetables she purchased were organic. Sometimes she will buy organic tomatoes, apples, and zucchini, but when it comes to bananas, oranges, and watermelon she always buys conventional.

Sarita said she knew that the pesticides applied in conventional farming harms children, whereas organic does no harm, so she tries her best to buy organic from the store, but only does so rarely. "If I had a lot of money", of course I would buy organic, said Armando, "because it's healthier", but he is not going to spend $6 on organic, when the conventional option costs $1. "I hardly eat organic food here because it is very expensive",

explaineds Magdalena. Occasionally she buys organic apples or bananas because they are the cheapest organic options, but not often. She would like to be able to buy everything organic, but "we are never going to be able to spend so much money on organic". "I don't know why it's so expensive", she commented, "they charge way too much for organic food." "That's why we don't eat organic. If it were a normal price, of course we would. But we don't have access to organic, because of the price."

Thus, farmworkers who had access to organic food back home now lack access to food grown without pesticides. Pancho said the food he grew up eating back home was better quality than the food he has access to in the United States. Not only did he eat more vegetables, but the food was less processed, more natural, and free of pesticides: "*más libres de pesticidas*". However, even though the food was pesticide free, it was not organic, because they used synthetic fertilizers.

Similarly, Juan told me the food he grew up eating "is not organic because they apply fertilizer". Felipe said they did not use many chemicals in the *milpa*, "just a little fertilizer" which they applied to the seedlings so that they would grow. Tulio said the food back home in Oaxaca was "*casi orgánico*", almost organic, because they applied chemical fertilizer to the *milpa*. Dario said that some of the crops they cultivated were organic, but others were not because they applied chemicals to the corn and the beans "*para la plaga, las hierbas*", for the pests and weeds. There were however other herbs they grew without applying anything. Plus, they rotated crops and let the soil rest to improve fertility. All in all, the food was more organic there than in the U.S.

While the vast majority of respondents pointed to food from back home being all organic because they could not afford inputs, a few did mention the synthetic fertilizers that their family used. Yet even those who did apply chemical inputs to their crops back home still emphasized having more access to organic in Mexico than in the U.S. since the food they have access to in the U.S. is grown with many more chemicals. Lack of intensive pesticide spraying means food was more organic in Mexico, even if it would not be considered certified organic according to USDA definitions, due to the nitrogen content of the fertilizer used. Either way, the food they ate back home was grown with fewer chemicals than the food they have access to now.

Conclusion

Food insecurity is commonly measured through a series of closed-ended questions about presence or absence of sufficient amounts of food. Measured in this way, farmworkers are more food secure post-migration than in their home communities because they face less hunger. But if measured in terms of accessing meaningful food that meets desired qualities – fresh, locally grown, and pesticide free – then farmworkers are less food secure after migrating to work as agricultural laborers in the U.S. A qualitative exploration of food access reveals comparative food insecurities: lacking sufficient quantity in one context and sufficient quality in the other.

Carney (2015: 34) urges scholars to devote more attention to "the prominence of chronic food deprivation" as the motivating factor behind migration. This study does just that by shining light on the heart-wrenching hunger that farmworker respondents experienced back home. But it also shines light on the high quality of food they harvested and slaughtered themselves. After all the of the trauma of crossing the border and adjusting to life as immigrant laborers, they have not forgotten what it tastes like to eat fresh and organic food. With migration, their hunger has decreased but they are not truly food secure because they have lost access to the fresh food they were accustomed to. Rates of farmworker food insecurity miss the fact that even those who are considered food secure are not eating the quality of food they desire. Standardized indictors of food insecurity and hunger can be useful, but subjective and comparative understandings of the binational experience are also important.

The farmworkers in this study contrasted the poor quality of food post-migration to the fresh, local, natural,

flavourful food from home. One of the biggest indicators of quality that farmworkers point to is organic: they cannot afford to buy organic food in the U.S., but speak fondly about the natural and organic food they grew and ate before. Most respondents said that food in their home communities in Mexico was organic because they relied only on rainwater and could not afford inputs, while a few said it was not technically organic because they did apply synthetic fertilizer. However, either way, food from home was *more organic* than the conventional food they have access to in the U.S. because it was pesticide-free.

Local and organic foods are associated with privilege, and while farmworkers do not have this privilege, they recognize quality food because they had access to home grown crops prior to becoming economic refugees. Fleeing starvation to work as agricultural labourers in the U.S., they arrived to a situation in which they are not only exposed to pesticides at work but also are relegated to low-class industrial conventional foods available at discount grocery stores.

One way for farmworkers to be able to access fresh, nutritious, local, and organic produce post-migration is through gardening. Scholars have promoted home and community gardening as a way to mitigate farmworker food insecurity. Minkoff-Zern (2014a) found that a farmworker community garden on the North Central Coast of California allowed indigenous immigrants from Oaxaca to access organic produce and eat a healthier diet than they could otherwise afford. As she notes, "gardens made these otherwise privileged foods available to them" (Minkoff-Zern 2014a: 215). Mares (2019) also points to gardens as a way to address farmworker food insecurity. Through a project where dairy workers maintained home gardens on the farms where they lived and worked, they were able to cultivate crops with increased nutritional value and cultural significance.

Kresge and Eastman's (2010) research in Salinas found that while only 37% of respondents indicated they already grew fruits and vegetables for self-consumption, 71% of those not currently producing their own food said they were interested in doing so. Similarly, Friesen and Humel's (2013) research that took place in Oxnard found that only 21.5% of farmworkers surveyed were currently growing some of their own food, but 77% of respondents said they were very or somewhat interested in doing so. Meierotto and Som Castellano (2020) found that although few farmworkers in Idado were gardening currently, many of them were interested in doing so.

Future studies should examine whether home and community gardens are a viable channel through which farmworkers can access fresh and organic produce, or if they are viewed as additional farm labour tacked onto an already exhausting week. Minkoff-Zern (2014b) notes that not every farmworker in her study wanted to garden, as many did not have the energy or desire to do so after labouring in the field all day. Yet, she also explains that garden participants contrasted the holistic process of gardening to the repetitive menial tasks they did while working in monocrop fields.

While gardening may be an important coping mechanism for farmworkers, as a short-term and immediate way to address food insecurity, it is not a solution to the problem (Minkoff-Zern, 2014a). To address the root cause, larger structural change is needed, such as agrarian reform to support livelihoods in the Mexican countryside, and citizenship rights and a living wage for farmworkers in the U.S. (Minkoff-Zern, 2014a). These hard workers who harvest the fruit and vegetables that feed people across the nation and around the globe fled poverty and starvation, only to find themselves in another situation of impoverishment where the quantity of food they have access to has improved, but not the quality. Given the abundance of fresh food produced in the agricultural regions where farmworkers live and work, it is not a question of supply, but of distribution (Wirth et al., 2007). Farmworkers must be afforded more rights and resources to sustain healthy and meaningful lives.

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