

# The Systemized Exploitation of Temporary Migrant Agricultural Workers in Canada: Exacerbation of Health Vulnerabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Recommendations for the Future

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## Background

- Every year, nearly **60,000 temporary migrant agricultural workers (TMAWs)** leave Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America to come work in Canadian agriculture as part of temporary work programs for “low-skilled” workers<sup>1</sup>.
- Though referred to as temporary, they often fill **long-term positions** and provide **crucial support** to the Canadian agricultural industry, which has seen an increasing disengagement from the domestic workforce in the last fifteen years.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many previously **existing health disparities** for TMAWs and increased the risk of labour rights violations.

## Objectives

- To examine **health vulnerabilities** faced by TMAWs during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide recommendations for policy and practice aimed at improving migrant workers’ health.

## Methods

- Recent literature pertaining to TMAWs’ health during the COVID-19 pandemic was retrieved. Different health vulnerabilities and disparities in access to healthcare for TMAWs were identified.

## Results

### 1. Increased workload and work-related injuries during the COVID-19 pandemic

Over 1,100 complaints from TMAWs between March and May 2020, regarding a variety of issues, including excessive increase in workload.<sup>2</sup>

In Quebec, it is reported that less than half of the province farmers employing TMAWs are observing the legal health and safety requirements.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Substandard living conditions allowing for the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus

The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program requires workers to live in employer-provided housing

Despite a 2018 federally commissioned study finding “a wide variation of what is deemed an acceptable housing standard” and “gaps in the housing inspection process” that “can potentially cause harm or injury to the workers”, no national standard for TMAWs housing exists.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Psychological difficulties

TMAWs are at a greater risk for the development of various mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders.<sup>5</sup>

TMAWs wide range of stressors including poor working conditions, that often involve physically strenuous and dangerous work, lack of access to adequate rest, vacation or recreational activities, poor working relations, exploitative conditions in the workplace, unsanitary housing conditions, and, most importantly, social isolation and feeling of loneliness.

### 4. Barriers to healthcare access

An Ontario study found that almost 20% of surveyed migrant workers did not have a health card and that 55% worked despite illness or injury for fear of telling their employer.<sup>6</sup>

TMAWs’ lack of knowledge on how to navigate and use the healthcare and compensation systems, in combination with language barriers and relatively limited literacy, have often been reported to limit their access to healthcare services.

## Recommendations

- A) We recommend that Immigration and Citizenship Canada grant **permanent residency status** to all TMAWs, as their ability to stay in the country should not be entirely at the discretion of their employer or third-party agencies. Giving permanent status to TMAWs would not only **facilitate their access to healthcare**, but it would also **give them the agency to exercise their rights and leave situations of abuse** where their health is jeopardized.
- B) We recommend the **implementation of federal housing standards** that should be established in consultation with public health agencies.
- C) We recommend that public health authorities provide employers with **clear standards regarding physical distancing, usage of personal protective equipment and sanitation protocols** in the workplace.
- D) We recommend that all TMAWs be covered by **complete provincial healthcare plans upon arrival** and that measures to make healthcare services accessible be put into place.
- E) We recommend that all TMAWs be provided with information regarding governmental directives, including public health recommendations, in their preferred language. Additionally, **safety training should be provided in workers’ preferred language** to ensure that all can benefit from it, TMAWs and local workers included.
- F) We recommend that TMAWs **be given access to language training programs**, such as those offered to permanent newcomers by provincial or federal governments

## Conclusion

- The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated multiple health inequities that were previously easily overlooked, while also underscoring the crucial role that TMAWs play in ensuring Canada’s food security.
- It is now the duty of local and national authorities to address major flaws in the structure and implementation of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and finally break a cycle perpetuating injury, disease, and exploitation

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### Conflicts of interest

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