

# Perceptions of the Campaign for Access to Driver's Licenses:

Exploring the Perception of Need Amongst Healthcare Providers and Migrant Farmworkers

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate and identify patterns in im/migrant farmworkers' and healthcare providers' perception of the need for driver's licenses for all people in the U.S., regardless of immigration status. As a qualitative research study, we used an ethnographic approach consisting of participant observation, interviews, and field notes. I found that healthcare providers did not see the visceral need for independent mobility for farmworkers, and instead viewed it as an inconsequential bonus. As for farmworkers, they frequently depicted mobility as one of their largest issues in accessing healthcare. As for the study's importance, mobility is essential to the general well-being of this particular population, and to people in general. To be able to move about freely is a necessity for those who live in rural areas, without access to widespread public transportation. To further this research in the future, we can increase the sample size of participants, as well as add specific questions regarding the campaign to our formal interviews.

## Background

New York currently blocks hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the state from obtaining driver's licenses due to their immigration status. Due to the extensive number of dairy farms in Western and Central NY, we have a large farmworker population, much of which are immigrants who do not have social security numbers. The Green Light NY: Driving Together! Campaign aims to ensure equal access to driver's licenses for all residents of New York State, regardless of immigration status. There are 12 states across the United States that already provide access to licenses for all residents, regardless of immigration status. These include California, Illinois, and our neighboring states of Connecticut and Vermont. Until 2002, when then governor Pataki issued an executive order barring access, NY was one of them (Green Light NY).

There are an estimated 4.3+ million immigrants in NY state (22% of the state population), about 867,000 of which are undocumented. Driver's licenses for all is necessary because it gives people access to everyday scenarios that they otherwise may not have been able to participate in such as driving to work, driving their children to school, or taking themselves or others to a healthcare facility.

## Research Question

The purposes of the larger study are to identify structural obstacles to healthcare utilization that pose the greatest obstacle for im/migrant Latino farmworker families in our region, and to explore which social resources do and do not moderate these challenges in the current sociopolitical and socioeconomic climate in New York. Additionally, we examined the life experiences and other factors that add to farmworker families' social resources and aid in their healthcare utilization.

For my particular subsection of this research, I examined the perception of need for driver's licenses in the eyes of both healthcare providers and directly affected im/migrant farmworkers. I hypothesized that farmworkers would be fully onboard with the plight of the campaign. Moreover, I predicted that, while healthcare providers would be overall sympathetic to the cause of the Green Light Campaign, they would not fully understand why it is a necessary step towards equal rights for the farmworker population.

## Literature Review

To date, there is no academic literature that specifically focuses on the different perceptions of the Green Light Campaign, but information provided by the Green Light NY: Driving Together! Coalition lays out a clear picture as to what their mission was and why it is important. According to the organization, "752,000 undocumented immigrant New Yorkers over the age of 16 are currently barred from obtaining driver's licenses due to their immigration status. In addition, over 70,000 New Yorkers that currently have TPS or DACA are at risk of losing their access to driver's licenses." The implications of this are that these immigrants are unable to register or insure their vehicles, in addition to not being able to obtain and carry valid identification. In the MILKED Report, it is outlined that "[Partially] due to their inability to obtain a NY driver's license, immigrant dairy farmworkers leave the farm premises, on average, as infrequently as once every eleven days," (2017).

## Methodology

Our overall research was comprised of ethnographic study in which we used a combination of participant observation and qualitative interviews to gauge farmworker access to healthcare. Moreover, we used an ethnographic approach to understand how healthcare utilization is influenced by socio-economic and sociopolitical forces.

Conducting interviews throughout Western and Central NY was an essential part of our study as we desired to access the largest sample size possible. Our main pool of im/migrant farmworker interviewees are dairy farmworkers working in the region and our pool of service provider interviewees included nurses, administrators, patient liaisons, amongst other professionals.

In addition to conducting these formal interviews, we were also encouraged to interact with the im/migrant farmworker population more casually by attending a community picnic and the Rochester #KeepFamiliesTogether rally.

## Data Analysis

In order to explore the perception of need for this campaign, I analyzed both English and Spanish transcripts of service provider and farmworker interviews that were transcribed via InqScribe technology. To further analyze this data, I then coded each transcript for important reoccurring language such as "raitero" (informal economy driver) and "need" using Atlas.ti coding technology. Additionally, I explored pamphlets, presentations, and flyers produced by the Green Light Campaign and their allies to further grasp their mission as a group and aid in my analysis of why each group has their own opinion as to how necessary it is.

## Results and Discussion

In their interviews, farmworkers often mentioned that a major reason that they could not access healthcare was the fact that they could not get a low-cost ride to the facility. Im/migrant farmworker perception regarding access to healthcare and cost of travelling to a healthcare facility can be distorted by what their farmers tell them, as depicted by Diego's\* explanation of how expensive it is to get to the clinic: "when [my farmer] drives [my coworkers], he pays out of his own pocket...but it is very expensive for the boss to bring someone to the clinic." This is not necessarily true because all it would cost to drive these workers to a facility is the amount of gas it costs, which is not more than a few dollars. The level of manipulation that farmers like Diego's exhibit emphasizes how striking the hierarchy of power is, especially in the farmer-farmworker dynamic.

In healthcare provider interviews, they frequently voiced that driver's licenses for all would be "nice" or "helpful" for the farmworker community, without acknowledging the real need for them. This is exemplified by a service provider stating, "[farmworkers] come up in groups, um, or they're brought here [by someone] so it doesn't matter if they have a license or not, they're not gonna have a car." This service provider is under the false assumption that ride cost or the limitation of being on another person's time are not issues, and they are also falsely assuming that farmworkers involved in this campaign have not already begun to save money in anticipation for a time when they are able to drive legally. This provider went on to exclaim "Who cares if they have a license, I don't care if they have a license. I want them to have a license because I want them to have car insurance." This is problematic because they, as someone who regularly interacts with the farmworker community, are less concerned about the independence and financial well-being of this population than they are about being struck in a hit-and-run by them and not being financially compensated.

Limitations I faced in conducting this research ranged from small, personal problems to broader issues that are impossible to fix in such a short window of time. In regards to the broader problems, the short 6-week program didn't allow for the large sample size that we need to broaden this research. Personally, it was very difficult for me to read through the untranslated Spanish transcripts because I do not fluently read Spanish.

The different perceptions of the need for the Green Light Campaign are important because they portray where the greater divides in our society as Americans lie. As Pascual from Onondaga County put it, "It's like you were a person when you had the license, and when they took it away, we stopped being people."

## References

Carly Fox, Rebecca Fuentes, Fabiola Ortiz Valdez, Gretchen Purser, and Kathleen Sexsmith. 2017. "Milked: Immigrant Dairy Farmworkers in New York State." A report by the Workers' Center of Central New York and the Worker Justice Center of New York.

Green Light NY: Driving Together! Coalition. "Factsheet for legislators" *Flyer*.

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\*All names have been changed for the purposes of confidentiality