

Mental Health Deterioration in the Face of Adversity: Child Migrant Workers in West Central Florida

Kamila Muraharisetti

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This paper conducts an exploration into the challenges faced by child migrant workers in West Central Florida, focusing on their daily struggles concerning substandard living conditions, demanding labor, and the pervasive fear of deportation. The study methodology encompasses a comprehensive literature review across anthropology, psychology, and medical journals. Additionally, it involves an in-depth interview with Isabel, a 38-year-old key informant from Wimauma, Florida, supplemented by insights gained through voluntary work with migrant families in the region. Amidst overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions, these children contend with a myriad of obstacles, including educational disparities, language barriers, and legal complexities. These challenges contribute to widening the educational gap between migrant and non-migrant students, exacerbated by low incomes, hazardous work environments, and accumulating debts. Consequently, mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress prevail, amplified by experiences of discrimination and isolation. The findings illuminate the harsh reality faced by child migrant workers in West Central Florida, underscoring the profound impact on mental health due to historical exploitation and media portrayal. However, amidst these adversities, the resilience and determination of child migrant workers and their families persist, as they uphold aspirations for a more promising future. Programs like DACA symbolize empowerment and signify universal values of dignity and familial sacrifice. This research highlights the imperative need for immediate support and intervention. It emphasizes the urgency for comprehensive immigration reform, reinforced enforcement measures, and community engagement initiatives. Furthermore, it recognizes the resilience and determination of these individuals, emphasizing the necessity for systemic changes to ensure a more equitable future.

Introduction

In Florida, seasonal farm work plays a significant role in the state's economy. The strawberry-harvesting season in Central Florida, which extends from late November through March¹, is a notable example of the state's agricultural industry. Seasonal farm work in this region involves a labor force that includes both American citizens of Mexican descent and undocumented immigrants from south of the border. A larger number of Florida residents live in immigrant families, including people of mixed immigration statuses. Therefore, child labor of undocumented immigrants is also prevalent, but the cases are clandestine and unreported. Many children are put to work, but law enforcement officials are unwilling to investigate these cases².

In West Central Florida, child migrant workers face numerous challenges, including substandard living conditions, strenuous labor, and the constant fear of deportation. These circumstances have led to significant mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Isabel, a key informant for this research that I interviewed in October 2023, who provides firsthand insights into these challenges. Living in Wimauma, Florida, for over 20 years as an undocumented immigrant, her experiences exemplify the hardships faced by child migrant workers in the region. These

challenges are linked to a history of child labor exploitation in the region. In the context of current events, these issues highlight the ongoing concern of child labor and its impact on mental health in the region. Isabel's experiences and perspectives shed light on the complex and multifaceted issues that child migrant workers confront daily.

Migrant children in West Central Florida often find themselves residing in overcrowded and unsanitary accommodations, where basic amenities are scarce. Reports tell of open-pit toilets, perilously close to their only water source, and some even directly contaminating the water supply³. These substandard living conditions expose these vulnerable children to health risks and take a toll on their overall well-being.

Adding to their already substantial burden is a litany of challenges, including educational disparities, language barriers, and legal status issues. As a result, migrant students frequently fall behind in their school curriculum. The persistent hardships of low wages, arduous working conditions, inadequate housing, limited access to medical care, and a disrupted education system contribute to a substantial achievement gap between migrant students and their non-migrant peers.

The work conditions for migrant children are challenging. It can be a dangerous job, with fast-moving pulleys and gears that

had torn off fingers in the past². They often engage in physically demanding and strenuous jobs in environments that can be hazardous, which can result in physical exhaustion and, in some cases, school dropout. Many of these young migrants find employment in farms and factories, where they work long hours, primarily to send remittances to their families, while simultaneously dealing with debts accumulated due to smuggling fees, rent, and living expenses. For instance, Isabel was intentionally chosen as a key informant based on specific criteria - she had been an undocumented child migrant worker in Florida for over 5 years and was willing to share her story. While Isabel's individual experiences may not represent the full diversity of perspectives, her narrative offers an in-depth account that epitomizes many of the common challenges faced by child migrant workers.

Their relentless hardships and challenges cast a shadow over their mental health, resulting in issues such as short-term effects such as depression, anxiety, and long-term effects such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Discrimination, social isolation, and fear of deportation further compound their mental anguish, pushing some to the brink of despair and self-destructive behaviors. These mental health challenges are not merely an isolated consequence of their daily life experiences; they are deeply rooted in the historical exploitation of child labor in the region. Child migrant workers have historically faced exploitative working conditions that have often gone unchecked. The representation of child migrant workers in media and policy debates further shapes public perception and policy discussions, with profound implications for their mental health and well-being.

Other efforts have been made to explore alternative explanations, such as pre-existing conditions or external factors for the mental health challenges of child migrant workers. The researchers have used several approaches such as clinical assessments, longitudinal or group studies. However, it's difficult to get data because Undocumented immigrants avoid health care and usually wait until health issues are critical to seek services because of their concerns of being reported to authorities⁴.

In the face of adversity, these children and their parents hold onto dreams and aspirations. For many, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) represents an opportunity for empowerment and self-sufficiency. These dreams reflect not only personal aspirations but also universal values, emphasizing the inherent dignity of all human beings and the nobility of those who make incredible sacrifices to provide for their families. Despite the daunting challenges posed by the socio-political landscape, immigrant families remain tenacious in their pursuit of these dreams. Their expressive power through art and shared experiences serve as a testament to their dedication and shared struggles.

This paper examines various aspects of the lives of child migrant workers in West Central Florida, including their daily experiences, mental health effects, historical exploitation, rep-

resentation in media, and aspirations. It underscores the importance of acknowledging and supporting these individuals to help them navigate the challenges they face and work toward their goals within an inclusive and compassionate society.

A Challenging Daily Life with Mental Health Consequences

The plight of migrant children in West Central Florida is marred by deplorable living conditions that cast a shadow over their daily lives. Many of these young individuals find themselves dwelling in overcrowded and unsanitary accommodations, where basic amenities are often scarce. Shocking reports have emerged, detailing the existence of open-pit toilets, described as "indescribably filthy," situated perilously close to the only water source, and in some instances, directly contaminating the water supply itself³. Such substandard living conditions not only expose these vulnerable children to health risks but also take a toll on their overall well-being, painting a stark picture of hardship and neglect.

Adding to the already substantial burden, prior research underscores the myriad challenges that migrant students face in their daily lives, ranging from educational disparities and language barriers to legal status issues⁵. These children are too often marginalized and underserved, with most of them falling a year and a half behind in their school curriculum. Their constant state of migration, coupled with poverty, further compounds the adversity they endure. The grim reality emerges that migrant workers and their offspring grapple with persistently low wages, arduous working conditions, inadequate housing, limited access to medical care, and a disrupted education system. The literature on the health consequences of immigration cites the link between illness and culture change⁶, highlighting the impact of migration on the health and well-being of these vulnerable populations. This prolonged state of movement and adaptation to new environments creates a dynamic in which the health and mental well-being of immigrant families are continuously affected, presenting unique challenges. Consequently, a substantial achievement gap persists between migrant students and their non-migrant peers, casting migrant farmworkers as "the most undereducated major subgroup in the country," underscoring the pressing need for meaningful interventions and support⁵. A study shows that first-generation students' average mathematics achievement was 25 points lower than second-generation students and 28 points lower than third-plus generation students⁷.

The experiences the migrant children face compared to non-migrant children is completely different because these differences are influenced by various factors related to migration status and the broader social context. Undocumented migrant children often lack legal status, which can lead to heightened vulnerability. Non-migrant children typically have the legal

documentation necessary for access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. Undocumented parents do not seek services for their children because of the inability to provide documentation for themselves authorities⁴.

The labor landscape for migrant children in the United States is a stark portrayal of relentless hardship and dire working conditions. These young individuals often find themselves toiling in physically demanding and grueling labor, enduring long hours in fields, factories, construction sites, and even slaughterhouses. Such harsh working conditions not only exact a toll on their physical well-being but also inflict profound mental strain. Reports and accounts from the field paint a troubling picture of children working in hazardous environments, often leading to their exhaustion and even dropout from school. The incessant roar of machines and the pressures they face, compounded by stomachaches and worries for themselves and their families back in their home countries, become their daily reality².

Far from the comforts of home, many of these young migrants are thrust into punishing jobs, driven by the intense need to earn money. They send remittances back to their families while grappling with debt accrued through smuggling fees, rent, and living expenses. The stories of young migrants owing substantial sums, like Nery, who arrived in Florida to discover he owed over \$4,000 and faced threats from his sponsor, underscore the dire circumstances they confront. These children often work grueling shifts that span 12 hours, six days a week, with some ending up in remote agricultural hubs like Immokalee, Florida, notorious for its history of labor exploitation². The situation faced by these minors, caught in the complexities of labor exploitation, depicts a distressing picture of their daily lives.

Childhood is often romanticized as a carefree and joyful time, yet for migrant children in West Central Florida, this portrayal is different. Their daily lives are marked by relentless stress and poor health conditions. These children endure physically demanding labor, grueling hours, and are often deprived of access to proper nutrition and adequate living conditions. The weight of their daily stressors, from the constant fear of deportation to economic instability, leaves an indelible mark on their mental well-being. Moreover, their overall health is compromised due to the absence of nutritious meals and proper healthcare facilities. For example, research shows migrant children have higher rates of dental caries, vision problems, acute respiratory infections, and exposure to pesticides compared to non-migrant children⁸. The age of an immigrant's arrival can significantly influence their future mental health, underscoring the profound impact of their developmental status at the time of migration. More comparative data on specific health indicators would provide further insights into how daily stressors disproportionately impact migrant children.

Cultural differences such as cultural norms, beliefs, values, and practices influence how individuals within a specific cultural group perceive and respond to mental health issues. In immi-

grant families, cultural traditions of privacy, being self-reliant or a preference for a native medicine can delay or leave immigrants less likely to seek mental care. Also, many children believe that their mental health needs do not compare to the trauma that their parents go through and refuse to seek mental care.

Extensive research on migrant students further reinforces the grim reality they face, including self-esteem issues, depression, isolation, rejection, and overwhelming loneliness stemming from the hardships they encounter, such as perpetual mobility, poverty, and discrimination⁵. The stories of young migrants enduring 17-hour workdays, enduring financial stress, and grappling with unanticipated challenges paint a poignant picture of their harsh reality. Many carry debts that hang heavily over their heads, amplifying their stress levels and diminishing the carefree image often associated with childhood. This is a stark reminder that for these young individuals, the pursuit of a better life comes at a significant cost, impacting their mental and physical well-being in ways that demand attention and action².

The daily life experiences of migrant children in West Central Florida cast a long shadow over their mental health, giving rise to a range of negative outcomes that encompass depression, anxiety, and other mental health illnesses. These young individuals navigate a world marked by poor living conditions, strenuous labor, and the ever-present specter of deportation. The toll this takes on their psychological well-being is evident in the prevalence of mental health disorders like depression or anxiety. The constant stressors and traumas they face have the potential to exacerbate pre-existing conditions or serve as catalysts for the development of new mental health challenges. The fear of deportation, in particular, looms large, hindering their access to essential resources, health care, and the ability to report crimes. Discrimination and social isolation further compound their mental anguish, pushing them to the brink of despair and self-destructive behaviors, with some even attempting suicide⁹.

An intriguing and somewhat unexpected discovery from immigration studies is the revelation that the health and educational outcomes of native-born children of migrants in the United States fall below those of their foreign-born parents and siblings¹⁰. This revelation underscores the complex interplay between the challenges these children face in their daily lives and the resultant impact on their mental health. Not much studies have been done about whether the longer migrant children are exposed to the associated stressors, the higher the rates of moderate to severe psychological distress, depression, and anxiety. However, as Isabel explained, "My older son, who is an American citizen, had to work when he was 13 years old, picking up crops. It was a very hard job, and he started having panic attacks. It affected his health, and Medicaid only covers certain aspects of mental health." This anecdote exemplifies the real-world consequences these young individuals face. The mental health advantage observed in first-generation immigrants gradually diminishes in subsequent generations, signifying the

deep-rooted impact of daily life experiences. These children grapple with transcultural and culture-specific stressors linked to their minority and immigrant status, with discrimination being one of the most significant culture-specific stressors influencing their mental health. In essence, their daily struggles manifest in the form of mental health challenges that demand acknowledgment, support, and intervention to help these young individuals navigate the tumultuous journey they find themselves on.

Historical Exploitation and Representation of Child Migrant Workers

The historical experiences of child migrant workers in West Central Florida reveal a deeply troubling pattern of exploitation that has persisted over time. To fully comprehend the contemporary challenges these young individuals face, it is crucial to delve into this longer history. Seasonal farm work is a vital part of the agricultural workforce in the United States, marked by shifting labor demands. For example, the strawberry-harvesting season in Central Florida typically spans from late November through March¹, drawing both American citizens of Mexican descent and undocumented immigrants from south of the border. Among these workers are children, some laboring alongside their parents, while others are unaccompanied minors staying with sponsors¹¹.

These child migrant workers often find themselves far from home, facing intense pressure to earn money to support their families and repay sponsors for various expenses, including smuggling fees and living costs. In some instances, children work under conditions that law enforcement officials may be reluctant to investigate, leading to instances where social workers stopped reporting these cases. Isabel, who crossed the border two decades ago as a child, revealed that she had to work 7 days a week earning much below the minimum wage. Rather than addressing the exploitation, they sometimes settle for explaining to these young workers their basic rights, such as entitlement to lunch breaks and overtime pay². This exploitative history casts a long shadow over the lives of child migrant workers in West Central Florida, shedding light on the historical roots of their struggles and underscoring the urgent need for reform and support.

The historical representation of child migrant workers provides valuable insights into the societal narratives that have shaped perceptions of their labor and lives. Throughout history, these young individuals have been depicted in various ways in literature, media, and broader cultural narratives. From the Industrial Revolution to the 1930s, a period marked by the widespread employment of children across various occupations¹², society grappled with evolving perspectives on child labor.

During this era, advances in machinery and industrialization transformed the workforce, with children often employed to

meet commercial interests and support the nation's expansion. It's important to recognize that their employment wasn't primarily about preventing idleness but was driven by economic motives and the desire to settle new frontiers. In the early 19th century, child labor was particularly prevalent in New England mills, where they accounted for over 40 percent of the workforce¹³. Some child laborers, including immigrants and rural migrants, were sent to work or worked alongside their families. Unfortunately, these young workers were denied the opportunity to fully experience their youth, as education and preparation for a better future were often out of reach¹⁴.

Remarkably, into the early 20th century, it was not uncommon for children to be unaware of their own ages¹², a phenomenon particularly prevalent in rural Southern areas and among immigrant communities. These historical representations underscore the complex and evolving dynamics of child labor in the United States, where economic, social, and cultural factors intersected, shaping the lives of young workers and influencing how they were portrayed in the collective consciousness. Understanding these historical representations is vital for comprehending the broader societal forces that have historically impacted child migrant workers and the mental health implications of their labor experiences.

Over time, the addition of new laws and policy changes have positively impacted child workers. The introduction of child labor laws that limit the working hours and the age of the child, promoting education as an alternative to work, and social welfare policies have helped mitigate some of the issues of child labor, but big factories still want to employ children because of labor costs and bring undocumented migrant children to the workforce.

In the contemporary world, the representation of child migrant workers reflects the evolving societal discourse surrounding their experiences. Various media outlets, including news media, documentaries, and literature, play a pivotal role in shaping how society perceives and engages with the challenges these young individuals face. Isabel, who currently resides with her six children in a small, rented apartment, two of whom work alongside her husband in the farm, emphasizes the present-day realities faced by these families. The portrayal of child migrant workers in these modern narratives provides critical insights into the collective understanding of their lives. Isabel's experiences underscore the importance of recognizing the complex and challenging circumstances that continue to shape the lives of child migrant workers in the region. The children work mainly because of economic desperation that was worsened by the pandemic. Many of these children are under intense pressure to make money. This labor force has been slowly growing for almost a decade but got worse in 2021².

Recent media coverage as "The New York Times" and documentaries as "The Harvest" have shed light on the complex and often harsh realities that child migrant workers endure. Criti-

cism has been directed at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) for its handling of these children, particularly regarding the lack of a tracking mechanism after they are released to sponsors¹⁵. As a result, many of these children find themselves engaged in grueling and hazardous jobs that blatantly violate child labor laws. This disturbing revelation has spotlighted the pressing need for more comprehensive child protection and support mechanisms. Additionally, contemporary literature and documentaries have documented instances where underage workers, who have crossed the Southern border by themselves, labor in environments where they are forced to spend late hours in proximity to hazardous machinery, further underscoring the violations of child labor laws².

The portrayal of child migrant workers in these contexts highlights the persistence of exploitative practices that have long flouted laws designed to protect young workers. The shadow workforce of child migrant labor extends across various industries in every state, even in the face of child labor laws that have been in place for nearly a century². This growing phenomenon has, to some extent, been driven by a chain of willful ignorance, as some entities turn a blind eye to the exploitation of these vulnerable individuals for their labor. Consequently, the contemporary representation of child migrant workers has revealed a concerning pattern of exploitation that defies legal safeguards and calls for urgent policy changes and stronger enforcement measures. The White House's announcement of policy changes and a crackdown on companies that hire children¹⁶ signals a step toward rectifying this deeply troubling issue and ensuring the protection and well-being of child migrant workers in the modern world.

News media discourse surrounding childhood and migration experiences in Florida and the USA reveals a complex interplay of factors that influence public perception and policy discussions, with significant implications for the mental health and well-being of child migrant workers. In today's media landscape, the treatment of child labor laws and the challenges faced by unaccompanied migrant children take center stage. Conservative think tanks and lobbying groups, like Florida's Foundation for Government Accountability and the Opportunity Solutions Project, actively work to relax child labor laws nationwide¹⁷. Florida's Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA) used funding from billionaire donors to accelerate state legislative action on child labor laws in 2023. FGA's efforts mainly focused on extending child hours of work and eliminating youth work permits¹⁸. This media narrative highlights differing policy priorities, with some groups pushing for stricter immigration enforcement while others push for enhanced protections for migrant children and corporate accountability¹⁹. The intricate debate even extends to questioning the classification of unaccompanied migrant children, underscoring the complexity of the issue. These media discourses significantly influence the perception and treatment of child migrant workers.

Various policy perspectives shape the discourse on child migrant workers. Some policymakers advocate for stricter immigration controls, emphasizing border security and enforcement, supporting limited government intervention in the economy, promoting free-market principles, lower taxes, and deregulation to encourage economic growth, and favoring a smaller federal government with more powers given to the states, highlighting individual and states' rights. Others support comprehensive immigration reform, including pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, favor a more active government role in the economy with policies focused on social safety nets, workers' rights, and progressive taxation, and endorse a stronger federal government that addresses social inequalities, provides healthcare, and regulates industries.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the human cost of contemporary immigration policies affecting unaccompanied children. The prolonged uncertainty surrounding the determination of asylum status has profound effects, leading to feelings of loss of control and powerlessness among these young individuals, resulting in poor mental health outcomes²⁰. Multiple studies have consistently highlighted the high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder among children in immigration detention, along with an array of behavioral, social, and emotional difficulties²⁰. These experiences, with their long-term mental health and developmental consequences, emphasize the necessity of adopting humane and comprehensive policies that consider the mental well-being of child migrant workers. The Labor Department can impose substantial fines on big corporations that employ child labor to discourage such practices and create a financial disincentive for companies to exploit underage workers. This strategy aligns with the broader goal of promoting ethical and responsible business practices.

The intersection of media discourse, policy debates, and the mental health of child migrant workers underscores the complexity of the issue. Media representations have the power to shape public perceptions, and they reflect a nuanced interplay of political orientations and trust in media²¹. The media tends to associate migrants with delinquency, crime, terrorism, and other social problems, while the information on its positive contributions is not delivered as much. For example, the speech of former President George Bush that was presented in the media described migration as a problem that required a solution¹³. The influence of these representations on societal attitudes toward immigration further highlights the intricacies of the matter. Understanding these patterns in media discourse is instrumental in fostering informed discussions and compassionate policy approaches that prioritize the mental health and well-being of child migrant workers.

Changes in immigration policies can significantly help mitigate the problem of exploitation of undocumented migrant children. Implementing policies that provide robust legal protections for all migrants, irrespective of their immigration status

can have a positive effect. Also, ensuring that child migrants have access to legal representation and avenues for reporting abuse will reduce the labor abuse of children.

Global organizations such as the International Labour Organization, a United Nations agency, view child labor as unacceptable and mentions that the current rate of progress would leave 121 million children still engaged in child labor in 2025. The organization is taking several measures to address the existing global issue, such as making a legal commitment to eliminate child labor, promote decent work for adults, and expand quality public education²².

Child Migrant Workers' Dreams and Aspirations

The dreams and aspirations of child migrant workers are a testament to their unwavering spirit in the face of adversity. Through interviews and observations, we gain glimpses into the dreams these children hold close to their hearts. These dreams are not just aspirations but also profound reflections of their resilience and optimism, shining brightly amidst their arduous circumstances. The stories of those who have been granted DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status offer profound insights. For them, DACA represents freedom from the traumas of detention centers and the fear of driving, as it provides access to a driver's license²³. It becomes a symbol of empowerment and self-sufficiency. With DACA, these children can pursue jobs related to their passions and education, fulfilling their dreams and providing for themselves. It is a lifeline that offers them a sense of choice and freedom to craft their destinies legally, transforming their self-perception and granting them the status and dignity they deserve.

These narratives not only highlight the personal aspirations of child migrant workers but also reflect universal values. They emphasize the inherent dignity of all human beings and the nobility of those who make incredible sacrifices to provide for their families, often by crossing borders in search of a better life. These dreams reflect a powerful rejection of the criminalization of immigrants and the recognition of the urgent need for comprehensive immigration reform to regularize the status of those already in the United States. Within these dreams lies the hope for a brighter future, where these young individuals not only succeed in life but also inspire future generations with their achievements. In their ambitions, they see themselves as role models, aspiring to emulate those who have supported and guided them, ultimately contributing to the collective journey toward a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping the hopes and dreams of their children, particularly when it comes to those engaged in migrant labor. Their aspirations for their children are deeply rooted in the desire to see their loved ones spared from the grueling hardships of child labor. In a region marked by an uncertain and unstable political climate such as Florida where

new laws against undocumented immigrants were added, parents dream of a future where their children can break free from the burden of strenuous work and embrace educational opportunities that could open doors to a brighter tomorrow. As Isabel put it, "I dream to one day be able to purchase a house for my children, for my children to have an education and not like me who only studied until the 6th grade." The stories of migrant families reflect these aspirations, demonstrating the deep yearning for a life where their children can flourish without the obstacles of arduous labor.

Several moving narratives illustrate the touching dreams of parents who never intended to permanently immigrate to the U.S. One couple, for instance, had embarked on their journey with the sole intention of working in the U.S. for a year, hoping to save enough money to return to Mexico and build a home for their family. However, their plan was thwarted by the unforeseen high cost of living in the United States²³. Similarly, a young adult crossed the border with the dream of working for just one year in the U.S. to provide savings for her family in Mexico. Yet, upon arrival, she found herself burdened with an overwhelming debt owed to the coyote who facilitated her border crossing, forcing her to remain and work until the debt was repaid²³. These stories encapsulate the profound aspirations of parents who embark on journeys to improve the lives of their families, even as they grapple with the intrusive presence of the U.S., which often underlies their hopes with an undercurrent of sorrow²⁴. In these tales, the desire to provide their children with a solid education as a means of self-preparation is a powerful motif, echoing the enduring hope that the next generation will have the opportunities they themselves were denied.

The hypothesis that parents fervently hope their children can escape the hardships of child labor, driven by the prevailing fear within Florida's political climate, uncovers a deeply poignant aspect of the immigrant experience in the state. With Florida's immigrant community living in constant fear due to the stringent immigration laws signed by Governor Ron DeSantis²⁵, these parents aspire to shield their children from the looming uncertainties. This new legislation not only criminalized transporting immigrants without permanent legal status into the state but also invalidated their U.S. government identification and restricted local governments from providing them with ID cards. Moreover, the mandate for Florida hospitals to inquire about patients' immigration status and the requirement for businesses with 25 or more employees to verify their workers' legal status have cast a pervasive shadow of apprehension over the immigrant population²⁵. In this climate of fear and insecurity, parents' dreams for their children are likely centered on providing them with a life free from the burdens of manual labor, with a strong emphasis on education and personal growth, as an escape from the shadows of political uncertainty.

The longing of immigrant parents for their children to be spared from the toils of child labor is intrinsically linked to their

desire for a brighter future within the context of Florida’s evolving political landscape. In the face of these strict immigration policies and the perpetual undercurrent of fear, parents continue to hold onto the vision of an America where their children can pursue their dreams and aspirations. Immigrants aspire to a specific future, yet they face the uncertainty of its realization or alignment with their desires²⁶. The dream of education, opportunity, and growth becomes a guiding light amidst the turmoil, as these parents remain determined to navigate the complex terrain of immigrant life in the hope of ensuring a better future for the generations that follow. Despite the political climate, these aspirations resonate as a reality to the enduring spirit of parents who dare to dream for their children even in the face of adversity and uncertainty.

Evaluating the possibility of realizing the hopes and dreams of child migrant workers and their parents is a pivotal exploration in this section. We conduct a thorough analysis of the existing socio-political landscape to ascertain the realism of these aspirations. This assessment delves into a comprehensive examination of the structural challenges, legal constraints, and complex social factors that may act as either facilitators or barriers to the fulfillment of these dreams. By navigating this intricate terrain, the aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted realities they face and the potential avenues for transformation. Isabel shared her perspective, saying, “Today, I’m happy because I live with my children and husband, and they all go to school. We can only go out to eat once or twice a year, but we love each other.” Their dreams of a better future are deeply rooted in the value of togetherness and the pursuit of education, illustrating the universality of these aspirations in the face of adversity.

While the odds may seem formidable, it is crucial to recognize the tenacity and determination displayed by immigrant families in their pursuit of ambitious dreams. To make such dreams possible, immigrant communities actively engage in events and celebrations, such as fiestas, which serve as visible testaments to their dedication and their shared struggles beyond the healthcare setting²⁴. Moreover, exploring the long-term journey of immigration offers insights into how immigrants strive to build their lives over time, with all the accompanying challenges, aspirations, and setbacks¹⁰.

The expressive power of art becomes instrumental in advocating for environmental migration policy, bringing the complex human experiences of migration to a relatable, human scale. Art has the potential to evoke emotions that can inspire meaningful policy actions²⁷. By capturing the resilience, aspirations, and challenges of immigrant families, art can bridge the gap between their dreams and tangible pathways to a brighter future, demonstrating the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity.

Toward Inherent Dignity

The plight of migrant children in West Central Florida is marked by deplorable living conditions, harsh labor, and adverse mental health outcomes, which cast a shadow over their lives. These young individuals face substandard living conditions, challenging labor environments, and the ever-present fear of deportation. Their mental health is severely impacted, leading to a range of negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. The daily struggles they endure, including discrimination and isolation, necessitate acknowledgement, support, and intervention to help them navigate the tumultuous journey they find themselves on.

The historical experiences of child migrant workers in West Central Florida reveal a deeply troubling pattern of exploitation that has persisted over time. This exploitation, marked by harsh labor conditions and a lack of legal safeguards, continues to cast a long shadow over the lives of child migrant workers in the contemporary world. The representation of these young individuals throughout history provides insights into how society has perceived their labor and lives, highlighting the urgent need for reform, support, and stronger enforcement measures to protect the well-being of child migrant workers. Media discourse and policy debates in the current landscape further complicate the issue, with political orientations and trust in media shaping perceptions of child migrant workers and their mental health challenges.

The dreams and aspirations of child migrant workers, as well as their parents, reflect their unwavering spirit in the face of adversity. These dreams and hopes, while personal and profound, also embody universal values, emphasizing the inherent dignity of all human beings and the need for comprehensive immigration reform. The aspirations of parents for their children to escape the hardships of child labor are deeply intertwined with the evolving political climate of Florida. The harsh immigration laws and climate of fear have not deterred these parents from envisioning an America where their children can pursue their dreams and aspirations. This paper explores the feasibility of realizing these dreams, taking into account the socio-political landscape, structural challenges, and legal constraints, while also highlighting the determination of immigrant families to overcome these odds through community engagement, long-term planning, and the transformative power of art.

In summary, this paper underscores the urgent need for a multifaceted approach that combines social and political change, mental health support, and compassionate representation to address the complex challenges faced by child migrant workers in west central Florida. The paper examines various aspects of the lives of child migrant workers in West Central Florida, encompassing their daily experiences, mental health impacts, historical exploitation, media representation, and aspirations, highlighting how this process represents a quest for inherent

dignity, even amidst mental health challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper aims to illuminate the intricate daily lives, historical exploitation, media representations, and dreams of child migrant workers in West Central Florida. These resilient young individuals face formidable challenges including substandard living conditions, rigorous labor, and the ever-present fear of deportation, leading to severe mental health consequences such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Discrimination, social isolation, and the persistent threat of deportation exacerbate their mental anguish, underscoring the urgent need for robust support and intervention. The historical backdrop of exploiting child labor in this region accentuates the urgency for reform and reinforcing support systems.

Despite these immense challenges, the aspirations and dreams of these children and their parents remain a testament to their unwavering resilience and determination. Narratives of sacrifice, like Isabel's account of enduring with just one outfit due to financial constraints when she first arrived in the United States, epitomize their unflinching dedication to their dreams no matter the odds stacked against them. Their aspirations, embodied in the empowerment and self-sufficiency offered by DACA status, mirror universal human values of dignity, and hope for a better future. The dreams of parents, deeply rooted in shielding their children from the adversities of child labor and the looming political uncertainties in Florida, echo the universal human desire for progress, prosperity, and an improved life for one's children. This formidable determination to ensure their children have better life opportunities compared to their own hardships reflects a universally shared motivation that compels people to migrate—the quest for a brighter future and a more secure environment for their loved ones.

However, the arduous journey toward realizing these dreams is fraught with formidable systemic, social, and economic challenges at every turn. Nevertheless, the remarkable perseverance of these immigrant families in the face of adversity and their commitment to overcoming shared struggles serve as a powerful beacon of hope. Art is an expression of human experience that can encapsulate the intricate narratives, diverse lived experiences, common hopes, and collective despair of marginalized communities. It serves as a medium to give voice to the voiceless, advocate for meaningful policy and social changes, and catalyze the alignment of marginalized dreams with tangible pathways toward a more just future. Additionally, religion and cultural practices often provide solace and resilience for undocumented immigrant communities as they cope with exploitation and uncertainty throughout their precarious journeys.

The potential mental health consequences and related risks for these vulnerable child migrant workers raise profound concerns that demand urgent attention and intervention. Without adequate

support systems and targeted policies aimed at addressing their unique challenges, many of these children may develop severe and enduring mental health conditions such as clinical depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These issues can severely undermine their educational opportunities, future career prospects, and overall well-being and capacity to thrive and contribute to society. Establishing comprehensive and culturally sensitive mental health programs tailored to address the specific psycho-social needs of child migrant workers is an ethical and practical imperative.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the mental health disparities and risks faced by this population, further research should investigate differences in outcomes between undocumented migrant children who are engaged in hazardous work environments and those who remain in school. Such comparative analyses can shed important light on the specific mental health burdens associated with child labor exploitation and identify opportunities for targeted interventions. Additionally, rigorously examining the potential long-term societal implications of deprived mental health support for undocumented child workers is essential. How will the adolescent mental health inequities and lack of adequate services affect their future education, livelihoods, community engagement, and overall well-being? And how will it ultimately impact their capacity to fully contribute to and integrate within society? These complex questions warrant extensive investigation and consideration by policymakers, researchers, immigrant communities and advocates.

In summary, this research underscores the moral urgency of policy reforms, substantially increased mental health support, and more compassionate and humanizing media representations of the real experiences of child migrant workers across West Central Florida. Meaningfully addressing the complex interconnected web of challenges, they face is pivotal in order to foster a more just, equitable and inclusive society where every child, regardless of origin or status, has equal opportunity to learn, grow, pursue their ambitions, and cultivate their self-worth free from exploitation, discrimination, and mental health adversities. The future prosperity, dignity, and contributions of these young individuals ultimately depend upon our collective social conscience, moral courage and political will to fundamentally transform their circumstances and structural barriers and provide them with the holistic support systems they need to heal and thrive. Their dreams of empowerment and interdependence envision a bright future, one where all children stand together, secure in their humanity.

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