



The University of Texas at Austin
Institute on Domestic Violence
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FE Y JUSTICIA
WORKER CENTER

Post-Disaster Worker Empowerment Journal Assessment

A Research-to Practice Fellowship
Project

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Center for Victim Research

The [Center for Victim Research](#) (CVR) is a one-stop resource center for victim service providers and researchers to connect and share knowledge. Its goals are to increase 1) access to victim research and data and 2) the utility of research and data collection to crime victim services nationwide. CVR's vision is to foster a community of victim service providers and researchers who routinely collaborate to improve practice through effective use of research and data.

Accordingly, CVR engages in a number of training and technical assistance activities to support victim research-and-practice collaborations. Specifically, CVR:

- Hosts a library of open-access and subscription-based victim research;
- Provides light-touch research-focused technical assistance to victim service providers;
- Translates research findings for the field in fact sheets, reports, and webinars; and
- Highlights useful research-and-practice tools and training resources for the field.

CVR also supports two types of [researcher-practitioner collaborations](#): interagency VOCA-SAC partnerships and local-level Research-and-Practice (R/P) Fellowships. In 2018, CVR's R/P Fellowship program supported nine teams of researchers and practitioners engaging in a variety of victim-focused research projects. Fellows were engaged in emerging, ongoing, or advanced research-and-practice partnerships. This report describes activities by one of CVR's 2018 R/P Fellowship teams.

R2P Fellows: Organizational Descriptions

The mission of the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (IDVSA) is to advance knowledge about interpersonal violence. IDVSA accomplishes this through research, education, and service in multi-disciplinary, strategic partnerships with researchers, educators, practitioners, policy makers, and other members of our community. Our efforts enhance the quality and relevance of research findings, their application in service provision, and ultimately, their benefit to survivors of interpersonal violence, and those who assist them. The Human Trafficking Research Portfolio partners with the Bureau of Business Research at the IC² Institute to examine the business and economics data involved in crime victimization.

Based in Houston, Texas, Fe y Justicia Worker's Center was established for Latino laborers facing discrimination, labor abuse, and exploitation. The center functions as a member organization. FJWC's mission is to provide a safe space for low-wage workers to gather and learn about their rights in the workplace, network for various social services, file complaints with government agencies, meet with attorneys, and connect with community allies. FJWC also organizes low-wage workers to improve conditions on the job and mobilizes workers and the general and religious communities on issues and campaigns to improve wages, benefits, and working conditions for low-wage workers.

FJWC is Houston and surrounding Harris County's only member-driven center focused on low wage and immigrant workers' labor rights, civil rights, and advocacy.

Description of the Problem

Houston is the fourth largest city in the country, within a state with some of the weakest labor laws and the most oppressive political climate against working class immigrants. Rest and lunch breaks, workers' compensation, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) trainings for the most dangerous jobs are all optional. Racial profiling policies, such as Senate Bill 4, exacerbate these risks and push immigrant workers to remain silent in the face of abuse and to feel even more threatened against speaking up. Monolingual Spanish speakers make up a large percentage of Houston's low-wage workforce and face extra barriers in finding safety and health education. To add to these vulnerabilities, the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (IDVSA) recently found that 234,000 workers involved in manual labor sectors are at risk of labor exploitation and trafficking at any given time.¹

The special circumstance of record-setting Hurricane Harvey amplified these structural and established risks and vulnerabilities as it slowly flooded Houston over the last week of August 2017. Post-disaster, immediate risks faced by workers spiked, with 64% of undocumented workers stating that they would not seek help for emergencies or report violations to government agencies out of fear of deportation.² Fe y Justicia Worker Center (FJWC) saw cases of unreported hate crimes, partially due to these fears, but also because workers often do not perceive or describe their experience as such. The center has received a wide range of calls from disaster unemployment candidates, to injuries at the workplace, to labor trafficking. FJWC staff were overburdened with the post-Harvey surge in calls in the year following the storm's devastation. Since the beginning of September 2017, FJWC averaged about 21 calls per day (145 calls per week) of post-disaster calls.

The daily functioning of the FJWC worker services consists of calls to the center, outreach events, and online presence, through which FJWC most frequently finds cases of wage theft or theft of labor services, workplace related injuries and illnesses, and unjustified threats or firings. Cases of sexual assault, discrimination, and labor trafficking are also reported. This established process of recording worker information and documenting cases has continued post-disaster, but with very special needs, many in crisis. To further the response to these needs, FJWC is working to establish what will be known as the Worker Empowerment Clinic and a *promotores* program. Through this

¹ Busch-Armendariz, N.B., Nale, N.L., Kammer-Kerwick, M., Kellison, B., Torres, M.I.M., Cook Heffron, L., Nehme, J. (2016). *Human Trafficking by the Numbers: The Initial Benchmark of Prevalence and Economic Impact for Texas*. Austin, TX: Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault, The University of Texas at Austin.

² Theodore, N. (2017). *After the Storm: Houston's Day Labor Markets in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey* (Rep.). Chicago, IL: University of Illinois at Chicago.

program, workers will continue to be provided basic educational workshops on worker rights followed by one-on-one consultations with staff and trained volunteers. Many of the volunteers for the Worker Empowerment Clinic and *promotores* program will be fellow low-wage workers themselves, which aids in the leadership development goal of the program.

Following record-setting Hurricane Harvey, immigrant workers in Houston have become the cleanup and rebuilding labor force responding to the city's devastation. Already a population that is highly at-risk of labor exploitation and trafficking, and vulnerable to oppressive and discriminatory practices, immigrant Latinx workers are in need of preventive education and intervention services during these recovery efforts. The Post-Disaster Worker Empowerment Journal Assessment served as a pilot for broader research focused on what risks workers are facing post-disaster as well as an assessment of preventive aims through the use of the Worker Empowerment Journals, which complement the ongoing development of the Worker Empowerment Clinic.

Addressing the Problem

Fey Justicia Worker Center, Houston's only organization dedicated to immigrant and low-wage worker rights, partnered with their volunteer, and human trafficking researcher, Dr. Melissa Torres to assess and evaluate a journaling program through the new worker promoter program, part of the organization's post-disaster worker safety response. The Worker Empowerment Journals were the vehicle with which this project was based and guided. Assessment of the journals through focus groups have helped to guide the development of the meetings, trainings, outreach, and leadership for the FJWC Worker Empowerment Clinic.

The biggest obstacle the team faced, however, was that with the limited funding, recruitment was restricted and direct outreach to day laborers who were not attending meetings, or not answering calls during the day to invite them to participate, was virtually nonexistent. In order for workers to attend *asambleas* for recruitment and then attend the focus groups at FJWC, they would have to get off work at a reasonable time (Monday-Saturday), drive downtown, and possibly fight traffic or need gas if they were at a labor site across the city. Those who were able to attend both the *asambleas* where we recruited and then the focus groups were mostly domestic workers (nannies, housecleaning) and some working in landscaping or as a mechanic who had fairly regular work, if not a stable enough job. The \$25 they would have received was also not considered to be enough compensation for a day laborer who would have to leave a (possibly unstable) job site early, find transportation to FJWC, and participate after a long work day. Therefore there was very limited participation from day laborers, who are the most vulnerable to the issues being addressed and who more often have the need to document their work experiences, as they may change as often as day-to-

day. Other than direct recruiting through calls to day laborers, another way this was addressed was by the other focus group participants themselves who either had previous experience as day laborers or knew day laborers and would make suggestions for how to make the journal and services more accessible to their vulnerable peers.

Data Sources

Dr. Torres led focus groups with interested attendees who were recruited at quarterly *asambleas*, by calls to members, and through word of mouth. Recruitment began at the first *asamblea*, but due to the meetings taking a long time and not wanting to overwhelm respondents, the second round of focus groups were scheduled during the week on two different nights. A couple of the *promotores* committed to the journal while others committed to the focus groups, but not necessarily journaling.

Therefore, two focus groups were created on two separate nights, four times throughout the 9 months – one group committed to journaling and one group was respondents who may or may not be journaling consistently but wanted to discuss their work experiences. Both groups were asked basic demographic questions each session, then focused on different topics such as importance of documenting their experiences at work, any changes they saw post-Harvey at work or in their personal life, confronting injustices or abuse at work or in the community, and their understanding of labor trafficking. These groups included approximately 12 women and 3 men with ages ranging from 35 to 65, though attendance varied in each group.

All groups were conducted at FJWC and in Spanish. Respondents were given an anonymous consent form in Spanish prior to discussion, and compensation in the form of a \$25 gift card after. The bulk of data collection came from audio recordings of the focus groups and some field notes taken by the researcher and FJWC staff present at focus groups and *asambleas*. Screeners for labor trafficking were offered to participants at *asambleas* and focus groups, though only one respondent requested to be screened (which resulted in identification of potential labor abuse being experienced).

Results

Focus group participants who were in more stable work settings had more time to review the journals and document their work experience, and shared very helpful feedback on how to better promote the need for documenting work experiences and the need to journal for mental health and empowerment by learning their rights through the journal. Because FJWC is a member organization where members educate, train, promote, and work with each other in peer-led interactions, discussions evolved from exploring the efficacy of the journal to discussing the mental health needs which arose from the discussions on various work experiences, labor abuse, and political anti-

immigrant rhetoric. In particular, the focus group attendees discussed the need to reach out to day laborers, who are the most vulnerable among their membership, and ways in which to make the journal more accessible to them, including visiting labor sites and offering a brief training on the importance and how to of documenting hours worked, employer demands, and any discriminatory or violent language or acts.

Both groups discussed the need for more accessible mental health services or opportunities to “vent” about their experiences. However, the group that committed to journaling was able to better define their needs, name their emotions, and felt more empowered to speak to their employers, fellow workers, or others in their community about their rights and demands. While both groups began the project discussing the stress and discrimination they face, the group who did not commit to journaling consistently endorsed feeling overwhelmed, stressed, tired, and frustrated throughout each session. However, the group who did journal consistently eventually started to say things such as, “After documenting my hours, I am realizing how much I am working for free,” “My back started to hurt, so I reviewed the journal and realized it happened the day after I fell but I didn’t pay attention to that,” “I realized my employer was not making decisions on things that affect my job with me in mind, but by what’s convenient for them.”

An unanticipated finding was that having a group to talk to and discuss the need for journaling assisted in empowering the workers. For example, when the journaling group shared experiences they documented, other focus group attendees would point out labor abuse or a rights violation and empower the respondent to speak to their employer, which many did and would report at the next group. The group that was not journaling, though, was *not* more empowered by documenting but was realizing their mental health needs during group discussions, though they had more difficulty naming the emotions other than “frustration”. They would discuss experiences of labor abuse, discrimination, or even sexual harassment which they or others faced and felt supported. This is something to consider, however, as the project aims to be more inclusive and targeted for day laborers, who have not historically shared as much in group discussions with the research team at other points.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Labor abuse, exploitation, and discriminatory practices by employers are rarely considered as forms of violence when prioritizing populations at-risk of crime victimization. Yet these experiences are common among low-wage and immigrant workers recruited into unstable or unregulated work environments with little chance for identification or recourse. Human trafficking efforts tend to focus on sex trafficking, specifically of children, in prevention, identification, and restoration programs. Yet labor, which is a daily experience and interaction in society, is often ignored and the

most vulnerable to such abuses – immigrants and low-wage workers – are often erroneously believed to not have the same labor rights as citizens.

Organizations working with immigrants, low-wage workers, day laborers, monolingual Spanish-speakers, and labor rights should consider the possibility of labor exploitation and trafficking as well as discriminatory practices or hate crimes faced by the population and the needs that arise from these experiences which are similar to other experiences of trauma and violence. In particular, disaster response organizations should also take this population into consideration as they not only present emergency needs but are also now more vulnerable and at risk of labor abuse and discrimination. For example, organizations might consider incorporating screening for and informing clients on human trafficking in disaster response settings (such as shelters and distribution sites) and include a resource list as well as a hotline in case a client is able to report. Organizations working on or with immigrants and their rights should also consider including workshops and trainings on labor rights and violence. A few focus group participants mentioned having received information on domestic violence or brochures on human trafficking, but were not able to identify situations of violence, abuse, or exploitation in their work settings as such. Trainings and workshops offered in Spanish and designed for this population and their needs as they relate to exploitation and abuse are still very much needed.

Natural disasters have the potential to dislocate large groups of area residents, force evacuation from homes, disrupt the earning potential of residents, and upend social norms and routines for those affected. For already vulnerable groups, these conditions increase the risk of exploitation³. Further, these conditions broaden the net of vulnerability among area residents and create conditions ripe for traffickers to recruit individuals who are frightened, out of sorts, and desperate for income. The elements that construct human trafficking are migration, vulnerability, crime, policy, and institutional/system factors⁴. These factors intersect during times of natural disaster. Individuals may be displaced or voluntarily migrate to areas affected by natural disasters because they know work will be needed. In post-disaster regions, people are economically, physically, and mentally vulnerable.

Sustaining the Partnership

Upon completion of the journaling study, Dr. Torres and the FJWC staff met to discuss recommendations for outreach and engagement of day laborers made by their peer

³ Nicholas Santella, Laura J. Steinberg & Kyle Parks, *Decision Making for Extreme Events: Modeling Critical Infrastructure Interdependencies to Aid Mitigation and Response Planning*, (United States, The Policy Studies Organization, 2009).

⁴ Seo-Young Cho, *Modeling for determinants of human trafficking: An empirical analysis*, (Portugal, Cogitatio Press, 2015).

immigrant low wage workers and to assess for gaps in current outreach efforts in order to implement the recommendations into an outreach plan.

Learning about the special needs and attention that should be given to those who are most at-risk of post-disaster labor abuse and exploitation, Dr. Melissa Torres and Ms. Marianela Acuña Arreaza have collaborated on a grant application for a second phase of this pilot study that will focus on outreach to day laborers at labor sites. Moreover, special attention will be given to their perceptions of mental health needs as a result of the abuse, violence, or stress they face as day laborers. The proposed outreach and study will be a mixed-methods community-based project exploring the experiences of immigrant Latinx day laborers in post-Harvey Houston, identifying any victimization of violence such as labor exploitation or trafficking, discriminatory practices, and their perceptions of mental health needs and accessibility to services. Both primary (outreach/interviews) and secondary (call ins/call logs) data will be analyzed to explore the types of violence and victimization being experienced by the immigrant Latinx day laborer work force post-Harvey, whether these experiences impacted their mental health, and what more accessible service provision – at FJWC and other organizations – would look like to this population.

As the Human Trafficking Research Portfolio continues to prioritize labor trafficking of immigrant and low-wage workers and FJWC continue to evaluate their needs and services, Dr. Torres and Ms. Acuña Arreaza plan to continue their partnership and to seek funding opportunities together.