

# Work-related opportunities and safety perceptions among Latino immigrant cattle feedyard workers with a TN visa

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## Background

Cattle feedyards are concentrated in the Midwestern part of the United States. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that Kansas and Nebraska together had 398 cattle feedyards with a total of 5,990 employees in 2018 (Ramos, Adhikari, Rautiainen, & Yoder, 2020). Many of these feedyards rely on foreign-born workers; however, there is limited data about immigrant workers in the cattle feeding industry.



Latino immigrant workers have come to the Midwest and to the cattle feeding industry through different pathways. For some, feedyard work is a temporary experience, but for others, such work is an opportunity to permanently relocate to the United States. Various visa programs allow foreign-born individuals to work in U.S. agriculture. The TN visa, a non-immigrant visa for professionals from Mexico or Canada that was established through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is one of the more commonly used programs in the cattle feeding industry. The TN visa program allows qualified individuals from those countries to seek temporary entry into the United States to engage in professional activities in their respective fields. The visa is issued for three years at a time, can be extended without departing the country, and a spouse and/or children of the worker may be eligible for nonimmigrant visas to accompany their family member (USCIS, 2020).

The TN worker experience may be different from the average agricultural worker for many reasons including having higher levels of formal education and specialized agricultural training, having a secure position at a feedyard, and the ability to bring their family with them to the United States legally.



Therefore, we sought to describe demographic and work-related characteristics of Latino immigrant cattle feedyard workers with a TN visa and those without. We hypothesized that TN visa holders' experience, training, and perceptions of safety climate would differ significantly from non-TN visa holders.

## Methods

We used data from the "Health and Safety Risks of Immigrant Cattle Feedyard Workers in the Central States" project to compare different characteristics among workers with a TN visa and those without a TN visa.

**Participants:** To be eligible to participate in the study, workers had to be currently employed on a cattle feedyard in Kansas or Nebraska, be at least 18 or 19 years of age (the age of majority in the state where the interview was conducted), and identify as an immigrant of Hispanic/Latino descent. A total of 243 workers participated in the study.

**Procedures:** Face-to-face interviews with workers were based on a structured questionnaire assessing physical health, occupational context, prevention opportunities, emotional health and stress, and demographics. Interviews were conducted with workers mainly off-site after working hours and could be completed in either English or Spanish based on the worker's language preference. Workers received a \$25-\$30 gift card for participating in the study.

**Analysis:** All data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. We conducted descriptive (e.g., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) and bivariate analyses (e.g., chi square, T-tests) for the variables of interest.

## Results

Table 1 highlights the demographic characteristics of study participants by TN visa status. In general, most workers were males (90.9%), had been born in Mexico (69.5%), and were married or a member of an unmarried couple (76.5%). Workers with a TN visa represented 16.9% of the total sample. TN visa holders were significantly younger than non-TN visa holders with a mean age of 32 years old compared to nearly 39 years old. TN visa holders also reported significantly fewer years in the United States, higher levels of educational attainment, and higher weekly income than non-TN visa holders.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants by TN visa status

Characteristic	Total (n = 243)		TN visa holders (n = 41)		Non-TN visa holders (n = 202)	
	N (%)	M (SD)	N (%)	M (SD)	N (%)	M (SD)
Sex						
Female	22 (9.1)		1 (2.4)		21 (10.4)	
Male	221 (90.9)		40 (97.6)		181 (89.6)	
Country of origin						
Mexico	169 (69.5)		41 (100.0)		128 (63.4)	
Guatemala	42 (17.3)		0 (0.0)		42 (20.8)	
El Salvador	15 (6.2)		0 (0.0)		15 (7.4)	
Other (e.g., Cuba, Peru, Venezuela)	17 (7.0)		0 (0.0)		17 (8.4)	
Age (years)***		37.6 (10.1)		32.2 (5.7)		38.8 (10.4)
Length of time living in U.S. (years)***		12.2 (9.6)		2.8 (2.1)		14.1 (9.4)
Income (n = 153)***		\$677.02 (\$161.77)		\$752.44 (\$126.34)		\$661.56 (\$164.14)
Relationship status						
Married or member of an unmarried couple	186 (76.5)		27 (65.9)		159 (78.7)	
Single	57 (23.4)		14 (34.1)		43 (11.4)	
Education (n = 241)						
Completed less than high school	145 (60.2)		1 (2.4)		144 (72.0)	
Completed high school/GED	37 (15.4)		0 (0.0)		37 (18.5)	
Some college or technical school	9 (3.7)		0 (0.0)		9 (4.5)	
College graduate	50 (20.7)		40 (97.6)		10 (5.0)	
Limited English proficiency	166 (68.3)		28 (68.3)		138 (68.3)	

\*\*\* Denotes significant difference between TN and non-TN visa holders;  $p < .001$



Although TN visa holders had slightly longer tenure working in agriculture, they had significantly less time working on cattle feedyards. TN visa holders tended to work significantly more days per week and more hours per day than non-TN visa holders (Table 2). Over 85% of TN visa holders reported receiving job-related safety training compared to 72.6% of non-TN visa holders; however, non-TN visa holders were more likely to note that their employer had regular safety discussions, 74.7% compared to 65.9%. TN visa holders reported a significantly higher safety climate and stronger employee engagement in safety. The majority of workers regardless of TN visa status believed that it was somewhat or very likely that they would be injured during farm work in the next 12 months.

Table 2. Work-related characteristics among immigrant workers by type of visa

Characteristic	Total (n=243)	TN visa holders (n=41)	Non-TN visa holders (n=202)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Years working in agriculture	12.9 (10.5)	13.7 (7.8)	12.6 (11.0)
Years working on a cattle feedlots***	6.1 (6.1)	3.9 (4.6)	6.6 (6.3)
Average hours worked per day***	9.9 (1.5)	10.7 (1.0)	9.8 (1.6)
Days worked per week***	5.9 (0.6)	6.3 (0.4)	5.8 (0.5)
Number of times injured on the job at a feedlot ever	4.3 (7.0)	4.3 (7.5)	4.3 (6.9)
Number of times injuries were reported	1.5 (3.7)	1.9 (5.4)	1.4 (3.2)
Safety climate***	25.8 (4.9)	28.3 (5.2)	25.2 (4.7)
Employee engagement in safety***	19.4 (3.9)	7.9 (1.3)	6.0 (1.7)
Management commitment to safety	6.4 (1.8)	20.4 (4.4)	19.2 (3.8)

\*\*\* Denotes significant difference between TN and non-TN visa holders;  $p < .001$

## Discussion

Few studies have reported on demographic and work-related characteristics of TN visa holders working in agriculture. However, guest workers are becoming more prevalent throughout the agricultural industry, and programs like the TN visa may grow in popularity as agricultural employers learn about different opportunities to recruit immigrant workers to livestock production jobs. The TN program allows Mexican professionals, many of whom are trained as veterinarians, to be employed on cattle feedyards in the United States.

In our study, many TN visa holders were underemployed, working below their skill level, in positions at the feedyard that did not match their competencies. Because of these workers' high level of skill and training, they may be more apt to be engaged in safety themselves, but employers may discuss safety less frequently because they assume that these workers already have strong baseline knowledge. For many TN visa holders in our study, this was their first experience working on a cattle feedyard. Ensuring that all workers have access to job-related health and safety training at the time of hire and throughout the duration of their employment is critical to promoting safety in this dangerous subset of livestock production.

Programs such as the TN visa can help the cattle feeding industry to have access to a highly skilled, available labor force and can offer foreign-born professionals an opportunity to work in the United States. Although TN visa holders had higher levels of education, most had limited English proficiency, which could hinder their professional development and career trajectory in this country. Connecting workers with English-language learning programs could help them gain language proficiency skills and may ultimately help retain these workers over longer periods of time.

Stronger oversight of the TN visa program is needed. TN visa holders in our study reported working significantly more days per week and more hours per day than non-TN visa holders. Perhaps, this was because many in our sample were single and unaccompanied; therefore, they may have been able to prioritize working extra hours to send more money home to their country. Or perhaps, employers made them work more than others because of their visa status.

This study was limited by the cross-sectional design and the reliance on self-reported measures. Our small sample of TN visa holders may not be representative of the broader TN workforce in agriculture. Cattle feedyards may not be representative of the greater livestock production industry so caution should be taken when interpreting our results. Future research should explore how the TN visa program is being used in other subsectors of agriculture and assess TN visa holders' occupational and immigration-related experiences through the program.

Immigrants already comprise a large proportion of the workforce in agriculture, and the number of guest workers will continue to grow as agricultural employers struggle to recruit local workers. Agricultural safety and health professionals should continue to collect data on immigrant workers' health, safety, and well-being to develop tailored training and information resources to support these workers.

## References

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