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## Article

# *La desesperación* in Latino migrant day laborers and its role in alcohol and substance-related sexual risk

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to better understand the relation between psychological distress and alcohol and substance related sexual risk in Latino migrant day laborers (LMDLs). In addition to examining the roles of depression and anxiety, it was also necessary to examine the role of *desesperación*, a popular Latino idiom of distress frequently expressed by LMDLs in response to the thwarting of major migration related life goals such as traveling to the U.S. in search of work to support families, projects and purchases in country of origin. Given the structural vulnerability of LMDLs to under-employment and frequent unemployment, LMDLs also refer to *desesperación* as a prelude to problem drinking, substance use, and sexual risk taking. Hence we developed and validated a scale of *desesperación* for LMDLs to explore this culturally relevant construct of psychological distress in this unique population of Latinos. Based on a cross sectional survey of 344 LMDLs, this study found that the *dissatisfaction* subscale of *desesperación* predicted alcohol-related sexual risk taking, while depression predicted substance-related sexual risk taking. These findings are discussed including implications of preventing alcohol and substance related sexual risk taking in LMDLs.

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*En la desesperación puede ser que se siente uno solo, deprimido y triste y lleva el momento en que uno caiga.*

*[In a state of desperation, one can feel alone, depressed and sad and therein lies the moment when one falls].*

The above quote is from one of the 12 Latino Migrant Day Laborers (LMDL) participating in a HIV prevention group, conducted by the first author, that were asked when they were most at risk for problem drinking and sexual risk taking. When this man answered, “Cuando estoy desesperado” [When I’m desperate], the facilitator asked what he meant by this term.

## Latino migrant day laborers

LMDLs supply labor to the informal day labor market, a population composed almost entirely of impoverished and undocumented men from Mexico and Central America who gather at street corner work pick-up sites, in front of paint shops and hardware stores, to solicit temporary work (Valenzuela, 2003). In their National Day Labor Survey (NDLS), Valenzuela, Theodore, Melendez, and Gonzalez (2006), estimated this population to exceed 117,000 on any given day, with

about 40,000 in California (Gonzalez, 2007), providing cheap labor to the housing and building construction industry, landscape and gardening, moving furniture, and several other odd jobs. With regard to background characteristics, results from a survey of 481 male LMDLs conducted by Valenzuela (2003) in California, where the current study was conducted, describes them as predominantly Mexican (77%), and Central American (20%), 84% undocumented, 34 years of age and 7 years of education on average, 53% in the U.S. for less than 5 years, and 50% married or having a partner. While the NDLS is nearly a decade old, its historical import includes being the first and only national survey to yield baseline data to which to compare. For example, the current sample is about evenly divided between Mexicans and Central American, 92% undocumented, 40.5 years of age and 7.3 years of education on average, 15% in the US for less than 5 years (average=12.5 years), and 48% married or having a partner (see Table 1). Thus, our sample is older with more years in the U.S., most likely due to what we observe to be an aging segmented population, and the greater number of Central Americans reflects the Bay Area’s history as a popular destination for such immigrants.

Day laborers experience prolonged separations from home and family in their countries of origin, typically lasting years given the cost and danger of border crossings that inhibit circular migration. While such family sacrifices are viewed as a trade-off for earning money in the U.S., NDLS data demonstrated years ago that day labor is

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**Table 1**  
Background characteristics of Latino migrant day laborers sample (N=344).

Characteristic	%	Mean	SD
<b>Recruitment site</b>			
San Francisco	75.9	–	–
Berkeley	24.1		
<b>Nationality</b>			
Mexican	46.5	–	–
Guatemalan	30.8		
Salvadoran	11.6		
Honduran	7.3		
Other	3.8		
<b>Age at interview</b>			
18–19	1.2	40.5	10.8
20–29	14.3		
30–39	33.7		
40–49	29.8		
50–59	18.3		
60–81	3.5		
<b>Years in United States</b>			
< 1–4	12.5	14.0	9.5
5–9	24.7		
10–19	40.7		
20–54	22.1		
<b>Indigenous identity</b>			
Non-indigenous	87.8	–	–
Indigenous	12.2		
<b>Documentation status</b>			
Undocumented	91.9	–	–
Green card	4.4		
Other residency	2.7		
Citizen	1.0		
<b>Marriage status</b>			
Married/partner	47.6		
<b>Years of schooling completed</b>			
≤ 6	48.6	7.3	3.4
≥ 7	46.5		

characterized by underemployment, frequently unemployment, with the vast majority earning wages below the federal poverty threshold (Valenzuela et al., 2006). Since the publication of the NDLS, the great recession, beginning in 2008, has only worsened the economic situation. Thus, vulnerability to poverty and psychosocial and health problems appears built into the LMDL experience.

### Structural vulnerability to psychosocial and health problems

The structural vulnerability of LMDLs refers to their *positionality* in the U.S. characterized by harsh living and working conditions produced and reproduced by particular sets of global economic, political, social, and cultural factors (Organista et al., 2012). As such, structural vulnerability is inversely related to health and wellbeing in which documented problems such as alcohol and substance use and sexual risk taking are embedded. Our structural vulnerability framework derives from Gupta, Parkhurst, and Ogden (2008) who conceptualize health risk, and sexual HIV risk in particular, as a continuum of causality beginning with distal structural and environmental factors leading to proximal situational and individual level factors. For day laborers, structural environmental factors include lack of access to work authorization resulting in an undocumented population of workers generally earning poverty wages in exchange for difficult and dangerous work, and subsequent poor living conditions, thousands of miles from home and families (Organista et al., 2012). As documented below, the day labor experience results in considerable distress at the individual level, lack of healthy social networks and resources, lives restricted by immigration surveillance, and consequent participation in risky situations that increase the probability of problematic

drinking, substance use, and sexual risk taking given the lack of healthier options.

### Challenging working and living conditions

Research on LMDLs documents lack of work as central to economic hardship manifested in inadequate housing and occasional homelessness, indebtedness, and difficulty maintaining relationships with partners in country of origin, or in establishing such relationships in the U.S. (Duke, Bourdeau, & Hovey, 2010; Negi, 2011; Nelson, Schmotzer, Burgel, & Crothers, 2012; Ordoñez, 2012; Organista et al., 2013; Quesada, 2011; Worby & Organista, 2013; Worby et al., 2014). A study of 219 San Francisco based day laborers found that two-thirds reported not getting enough to eat, and over half reported poor or fair health, problems associated with duration as a day laborer and financially supporting three or more people (Nelson et al., 2012). In a study of 89 LMDLs from 3 work pick up sites in the Los Angeles, Bacio, Moore, Karno, and Ray (2014) found that migration-related stress (i.e., job-related problems, daily hassles related to being a day laborer, missing children back home, etc.) was negatively related to self-reported health, which was in turn negatively related to depression. A study of over 100 day laborers surveyed in the San Francisco Bay Area found that almost 60% reported high rates of stress related to unstable lives, relationship and communication difficulties, and alcohol/substance use (Duke et al., 2010). Problematic alcohol and substance use, including in relation to work injury and sexual risk taking, have been the focus of most LMDL research as described below.

#### Work injury

Studies of work injury document its prevalence and negative impact on earnings, health and mental health. For example, 20% of NDLS participants reported work-related injuries with the majority receiving no medical attention (Valenzuela et al., 2006). In San Francisco, Walter, Bourgeois and Loinaz (2004) documented chronic anxiety about getting injured in day laborers given work characterized by a lack of safety equipment and training yet economic pressure to take dangerous chances. Further, when work injury did occur, Walter et al. found that it was typically internalized as personal failure to fulfill one's role as a provider to family back home, thus leading to shame, depression and inhibited communication with family. In a subsequent ethnographic study of 40 LMDLs in San Francisco, Walter et al. (2004) found that work injury was accompanied by depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse.

#### Alcohol and risky sexual activity

Several studies document problematic drinking among LMDLs (Duke et al., 2010; Galván, Ortiz, Martinez, & Bing, 2009; Negi, 2011; Nelson et al., 2012; Solorio & Galvan, 2009; Worby et al., 2014) with emphasis on binge drinking. For example, in Nelson et al.'s (2012) study of 219 San Francisco day laborers, they found only 3.2 drinking days per month or less yet a mean of 8.2 drinks on days in which drinking occurred. Further, drinking was greater in LMDLs with three plus years in the U.S. as compared to newcomers. A study of 365 Los Angeles day laborers also reported a history of binge drinking in nearly half of the sample as defined as 6 drinks or more at least once a month during the past year (Solorio & Galvan, 2009). Similarly, a survey of 102 LMDLs in Berkeley, California, found that seven beers was the average number of drinks per sitting, with a weekly average of more than 16 drinks, and that sexual relations commonly co-occurred with drinking (Organista & Kubo, 2005).

With regard to context, Worby et al. (2014) found in their qualitative study of 51 LMDLs that intentions to avoid drinking were common but frequently undermined a host of social–environmental

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