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Research article

Substantiating a crisis: Understanding farmer mental health in Iowa

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Abstract

In 2016, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report indicating that rates of suicides for farmers were 84.5 per 100,000, four times higher than the general population and higher than other high-risk groups, such as military veterans. Five months later, it was retracted due to a classification error. However, the report had already made national and global news, sparking a sense of urgency among policy makers, the media, and farm groups. Despite evidence that occupational stress in agriculture stems from structural sources, such as volatile economic conditions resulting from trade instability and unstable commodity prices, solutions to the problem of suicide among farmers tend to emphasize individualized actions, such as seeking counseling and mental health support. This paper examines recent media and policy initiatives as well as interactions among farm support agencies. We argue that despite evidence of structural challenges, the solutions proposed typically require individualized action by farmers. This response is consistent with agrarian ideologies that portray farmers as uniquely independent actors and absolves policy makers, lenders, and agribusinesses of culpability in promoting an agricultural industry that is responsible for high levels of occupational stress among its most critical participants.

KEYWORDS: farmer suicide, US farm policy, farmer mental health

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Introduction

In 2016, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report showing that suicide rates among farmers were among the highest of all occupational groups (McIntosh et al., 2016). Using 2012 data from the National Violent Death Reporting System in 17 states, the authors stated that "workers in the farming, fishing, and forestry occupational group had the highest rate of suicide (84.5 per 100,000)." In their discussion, the authors posited that isolation, volatile economic conditions, stigma, access to the means of harm (particularly firearms), and exposure to pesticides may contribute to this exceptionally high rate of suicides among farmers. The report was widely cited and initiated a period of increased media and political attention to the issue of farm suicide in the US.

However, in 2018, the report was retracted due to a "coding error." According to the website Retraction Watch (Marcus, 2018), the retraction was a first for the CDC. The error stemmed from how "farmers" are coded, as opposed to farm workers. Farmers are considered part of the "management occupation" category, not part of the farming, fishing, and forestry occupational group. The original report referenced farmers as part of the farming, fishing, and forestry occupational category. A corrected report issued in 2018 found that suicide rates among those in the management occupation, which now included farmers, were not significantly different than the national average (Peterson et al., 2018).

Regardless, the original report prompted significant media attention and calls for additional support for farmers' mental health in the 2018 Farm Bill. The attention continued into the US presidential primary campaigns in 2019 when candidate Cory Booker claimed, "farmer suicide rates are as high as they have been since the Great Depression" on MSNBC. The fact checking journalism outlet PolitiFact ultimately deemed the claim "false" given the lack of reliable data available to assess farmer suicide rates during the Depression. Notably, the data do still suggest that suicide rates are higher among people working in agriculture than the general population and most other occupational groups. A 2020 report by the CDC used data from a larger sample, 32 states, showed a rate of 36 per 100,000 for those in the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting industry. This is higher than the overall industry rate of 27 per 100,000 (Peterson et al., 2020).

This paper considers the broader narrative of farm suicide in the Midwestern United States, including media reports, federal programs, and stakeholder meetings held in the state of Iowa. The CDC's reporting, and retractions, related to farm suicide bolstered calls for federal policy to take steps to address mental health and wellbeing among

farmers. The 2018 reauthorization of the Farm Bill did fund programs related to mental health programming, which have been implemented across the region. However, we argue here that the focus, which has largely been on counseling and mental health services for farmers, does not address the root problems of economic volatility and the need for structural change in agriculture. We further suggest that the US cultural emphasis on independence and individualism in rural areas, and especially among farmers, absolves financial lenders, agribusiness, and policy makers of their role in scaffolding agricultural structures and practices that contribute to poor mental health among farmers.

Background

Farming holds a privileged position in the American imaginary. Pastoral ideals of agrarian farming and food production abound in supermarkets and political campaigns, hiding the reality of industrialization and the "machine in the garden" (Marx, 1964). As Kathryn Marie Dudley reminds us, "there is a serious disconnection between what we know and what we want to believe about farming as a way of life" (2000, p. 6). The pastoral ideal still has resonance in media, marketing, and popular culture and has been dubbed "supermarket pastoral" by Michael Pollan (2006). "Where we look to the countryside to find order, beauty and humane community, the realities of technology and industrial society insistently intrude, reminding us of 'the machine's increasing domination of the visible world'" (Dudley, 2000, p. 6). Wendell Berry writes, "in all this, few people whose testimony would have mattered have seen the connection between the 'modernization' of agricultural techniques and the disintegration of the culture and the communities of farming" (Berry, 1996, p. 41). Much of the popular narrative around agriculture and the US is rooted in Jeffersonian Agrarianism, which portrays farmers as the independent embodiment of democracy (Freyfogle, 2001). However, this perspective hides the realities of modern agriculture which, as many scholars have pointed out, have negatively affected rural economies, health, and culture (Goldschmidt, 1978b; Manning, 2004; Thurlow et al., 2019).

Policy

Despite popular conceptions of independent agrarians, agricultural practices in the United States are deeply embedded in and largely driven by federal farm policy, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The federal Farm Bill is reauthorized by Congress every five years and outlines programs for commodity support, conservation programs, crop insurance and subsidized loans, grant support for re-

search and development, and nutrition programs (Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, 2018). The Farm Bill has shaped agricultural practices over time. Notably, the 1973 Farm Bill fundamentally changed farm philosophy and policy. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz famously promoted farming "fencerow to fencerow." An unapologetic proponent of scientific, mechanized farming, Secretary Butz's calls to expand were embraced by US farmers, equipment manufacturers, and input producers. Ulrich writes, "the bill was an act of faith that there would not be another string of low-priced years" (Ulrich, 1989, p. 136). The faith of farmers and policy makers was shaken, however, when low commodity and land prices, combined with high debt loads, resulted in the farm crisis of the 1980s. The economic crisis caused widespread social destruction in rural areas. Farming communities experienced high rates of suicide and violence as their infrastructure and support networks crumbled (Davidson, 1996).

Although anthropologists and other social scientists have long recognized the connections between agricultural practices, policy, and the health and wellbeing of rural communities (Barlett, 1993; Dudley, 2000; Goldschmidt, 1978a), the emphasis in federal policy has primarily focused on increasing agricultural yields, regardless of social or environmental cost. More recent Farm Bill authorizations have identified areas of social support for farmers; however, those programs promote individualized services that are disconnected from the economic structures of agriculture that directly contribute to stress and reduce wellbeing. As we show here, USDA policies that aim to address farmer stress and wellbeing focus on increasing mental health services, rather than enhancing farmers' market independence, choice, or control over their own operations.

US farmers and mental health

Public health researchers have recently begun to assess the issue of farm stress and mental health. Arora and colleagues (2020) examined psychological stressors among farm owner-operators in Iowa, Ohio, and Missouri. Finances, climate and weather, and farm workload and management were the most frequently noted psychological stressors among this group. Rudolphi and colleagues (2020) sought to identify the occupational stressors of young adult farmers and ranchers in the Midwest, as well as estimate the prevalence of anxiety and depression among this group in their 2019 study. The sample included 170 young farmers and ranchers whose mean age was 28.9 years old; 71 percent of respondents met the criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder and 53 percent met the criteria for Major Depressive Disorder. Stressors of greatest concern included personal finances and time pressures. Stressors such as personal finances, time pres-

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sures, economic conditions, and employee relations were all associated with anxiety and depression in this group.

Liang and colleagues (2021) cite these established stressors (namely, farm bankruptcies, stress, depression, and suicide) as reason to examine the effect of social support on psychological distress among farmers. They used a survey to assess whether having access to cooperative programs ("co-ops") and social support had an impact on symptoms of depression among Midwest dairy farmers. Social support, cooperative educational opportunities, and mentorship programs were associated with decreased symptoms of depression, while cooperative policy discussions were associated with increased symptoms of depression. In a follow up study, the researchers sought to contextualize Midwest dairy farmers' co-op experiences and characterize how co-ops' economic and social impacts affect farmers' mental health. Study participants all identified financial difficulty as a main trigger for increased stress; many agreed that stress, depression, and suicide was prevalent among farmers. When asked about resources provided by co-ops, many participants cited representation, services for production and marketing, and social and civic engagement opportunities. Co-ops also appeared to play a role in promoting farmers' mental health: co-op staff and board members serve as first responders to distressed farmers, facilitators of mental health discussions, and a source of community for farmers. This study suggests that co-ops promote farmers' mental health by increasing sense of belonging and perceived level of control (Liang et al., 2022).

Others have drawn comparisons between occupational safety research and interventions in other industries to address mental health. While traditional farming hazards include chemical exposure or dangerous machinery, psychosocial hazards, "factors in the design or management of work that increase the risk of work-related stress which can then lead to psychological or physical harm" (Sun et al., 2022, p. 2), also have the potential to create a safety risk. According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001), psychosocial hazards arise from the intersection of job demands and job resources (Figure 1). In research on the construction industry, Sun and colleagues (2022) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between psychosocial hazards and mental health, focusing specifically on the effect of job demands compared to job resources. Job demands are defined as "those physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological cost," (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501) while job resources refer to the "physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that facilitate work goal achievement and promote personal development" (Sun et al., 2022, p. 2). In

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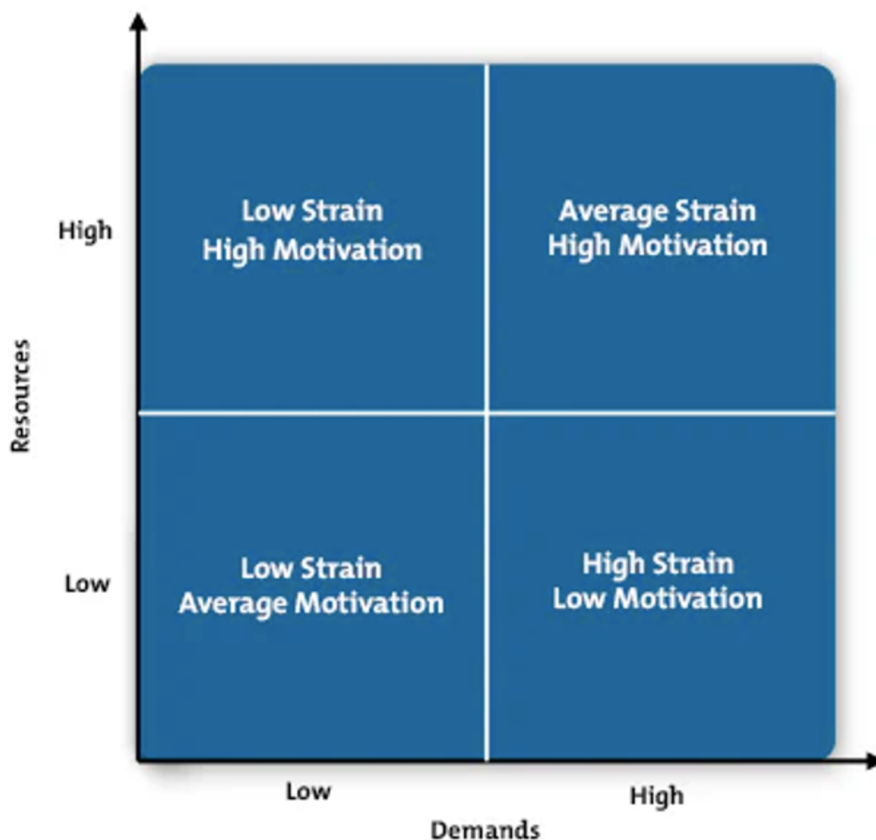
the JD-R model, work-related mental health problems occur via combination of high job demands and limited job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). Sun and colleagues concluded that high job demands (role conflict, job insecurity, interpersonal conflict, role overload) tend to have more adverse mental health implications compared to low job resources (low job support, low reward / recognition, lack of career development).

Figure 1

The job demands-resources model (adapted from Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)



While farming and construction are discrete workforces, both industries involve high pressure work with job demands beyond the worker's control: for construction workers, socioeconomic conditions, project overload, home-work conflict (Sun et al., 2022); for farmers, commodity prices, financial pressures, debt, climate change, overwork, seasonal conditions, government regulations, compliance (Lunner Kolstrup et al., 2013). Both occupational groups have rates of suicide that exceed that of the general population (Peterson et al., 2020). Given these similarities between groups, it is reasonable to conclude that Sun and colleagues' findings about the greater adverse impact of high job demands compared to low job resources on construction worker mental health could apply to farmers.

Media

The recent media attention to farmer stress and suicides in the US regularly points to two structural contributing factors: economic volatility and "extreme weather events" or "climate change." The extreme weather events were starkly evident in 2019 as raging floods on the Missouri River affected farmland from South Dakota through Missouri. Fields were rendered un-useable and stored grain was ruined as the water caused dry corn and soybeans to swell, bursting the sides of bins and spilling thousands of bushels of wet, useless grain. Images of these grain bins saturated local and national coverage (Eller, 2019; Smith & Schwartz, 2019). Less regularly noted was that the reason the grain was in the bins, and not already sold abroad, was a result of trade wars that interrupted the normal markets for Midwestern farmers. Thus, the damaging effects of the floods were exacerbated by policy disruptions, a structural component of agriculture that is not typically highlighted.

Even as economics and climate are implicated by research, media stories often quickly pivot and focus on the lack of mental health services in rural areas, farmers' unwillingness to use them, or, such as in a 2019 piece in the Washington Post, personal profiles of loss and the grief of a spouse who wonders if she could have done more to stop her young husband from killing himself with his deer rifle, leaving her with $300,000 in debt and three children under the age of 13 (Gowen, 2019).

Over the decades, connections and comparisons to the 1980s farm crisis have continued and stories frequently focus on individuals or families. In 2013, Iowa PBS aired a documentary on the farm crisis of the 1980s (Burgmeier, 2013), focusing on consequent suicide and murder rates among farm people. The piece focuses on three farm families, each affected by deteriorating economic conditions, the stigma of mental illness, and the pressure of upholding long-standing family farms. The family of Daniel Cutler, a farmer from Sioux City, Iowa, calls his suicide a "perfect storm of circumstances," with a focus on the collision between Daniel's personal attributes and symptoms of the Farm Crisis that ultimately led to his death:

[Karen Heidman, Daniel Cutler's first wife]: He had a note in his shirt pocket that indicated where a suicide note could be found and the first, the opening statement of the suicide note was, 'the farm killed me.' I think it was a perfect storm of circumstances. This was the first serious impediment to a goal that he had ever experienced. It was a shame that intelligence and determination and a magnetic personality were not going to be equal to overpowering market forces. It was continuous bad news on the TV and ra-

dio about the farm economy, shame for the financial circumstances of the family that he thought were his fault, shame of the stigma of mental illness and the loss of a dream.

Likewise, more recent articles on farmer mental health in Iowa highlight farmers' taciturn nature as reason for high rates of suicide among this occupational group. In December 2022, We Are Iowa published a story on mental health among Iowa's farmers and rural communities (Kutz, 2022). The piece cites 2020 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that says farmers, ranchers, and other agriculturalists are more than two times more likely to die by suicide in the US compared to other occupations. According to an interview with Dr. David Brown with the Iowa State University Extension for Farm and Ranch Wellbeing, this statistic could be due to most farmers being male and having more access to guns, fitting with wider population trends of higher suicide rates among men compared to women. Beyond general population-level trends, farmers are framed as a group with a unique risk of poor mental health and suicide ideation:

> many farmers [view] their job as part of their culture and heritage. The idea of losing that part of them can be detrimental to their health. [Dr. Brown:] "Because farming is such a key part of their identity, we know that losing a farm, or any type of physical disability, physical illness that allows them not to farm is also a big risk for suicide. There's also … the stress of isolation, the kind of self-reliance independence that farmers have. And not wanting to seek help when maybe they would benefit from it." (Kutz, 2022)

In this article, the onus of solving the farmer mental health crisis is placed on farmers themselves. Dr. Brown urges farmers to "do more than just tough it out," saying, "They probably need to ask and get some help and seek out help – not only for the health care, but their mental health care as well." Luckily for farmers, the article highlights newly established programs that will help them to do just that. Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig partnered with Iowa State University to fund and build their outreach program (including a $500,000 grant to expand farmer mental health support programs in Iowa), while Senator Joni Ernst's FARMERS FIRST Act aims to "establish helplines, provide suicide prevention training for farm advocates, create support groups, and reestablish the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network."

An October 2022 article from NPR illustrates the impact of such programs using a vignette from a mental health outreach event held at the Monona County (Iowa) Farm Bureau meeting (Crawford, 2022):

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> [Narrator]: [The outreach coordinator] directs the crowd to the pamphlets sitting in front of them. They're packed full with suicide warning signs and hotline numbers. The outreach coordinator says sometimes this presentation is met with awkward laughter. Other times, she sees its impact.
>
> [Outreach coordinator:] There were a few sessions that I had where someone would come up after me and say, you know, there was a guy that was sitting in this training. He attempted to take his own life several times already. So thank you.

As is the case in preceding articles, this piece frames interventions addressing individual behavior as a viable solution to high rates of farmer suicide, while simultaneously acknowledging that many of the stressors farmers face are, in fact, "out of their control – commodity prices, global markets." The narrative quickly shifts to the aggregate of qualities that distinguish farmers from other occupational groups, and ultimately positions these traits as reason for the farmer mental health crisis. For example, in the October 2022 NPR article highlighting farm stress:

> [Narrator:] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says farmers and ranchers are nearly two times more likely to die by suicide in the US compared to other occupations. Many hesitate to tell someone their troubles.
>
> [Dr. Michael Rosmann:] [Farmers are] reluctant to reveal what they perceive as weaknesses when admitting that we need help is a strength, not a weakness. They often show the signs of distress to people who they work with regularly. They will tell people who are perceived to be on their side about what they're going through. (Crawford, 2022)

Media stories also highlight individual cases of farmer suicide as "manifestations of despair in rural America," which serve to strengthen federal and state efforts to improve mental health outreach across Iowa (Mehta, 2020). Troy Sand was a farmer in northwestern Iowa, where his family's farm can trace its roots back to 1886. Mehta names several stressors faced by farmers like Sand, including "uncertainty over weather, commodity prices, the abundance of their harvest … growing pressure from agribusiness consolidation, biblical levels of flooding and steep tariffs because of the trade war with China." The article takes care to separate Sand's death from global farming issues, saying, "Not all suicides … are the result of economic problems. In Sand's case, as in many, the causes appear to be more complex and run much deeper." Family prominence and legacy and the stigma surrounding mental health issues in small, rural communities are named as

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major contributing factors in his death. Eulogies from Sand's family members further position Sand as an anomaly, distinct from the economic and political challenges of his occupation, rather than as a farmer embedded in this context while experiencing mental health issues. Together, these articles are well-positioned to answer the question of "How to address the farmer mental health crisis?" with policies and programs that target individual-level behaviors.

The emphasis on individual-level behaviors also provides a structure of reporting for extension or mental healthcare outreach as well as a way for these professionals to enact and perform perceived agrarian relationships. The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach (ISUEO) reported that the funds they received from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, ISUEO staff, "provided more than 1,500 direct, one-on-one local consultations and nearly 6,000 group consultations across the state, sharing key farm stress resources" (Brown, 2022). Individualized services and resource sharing endeavors are easy to account for and demonstrate impact of a grant-funded program. Another emphasis of ISUEO's programming is training community members in Mental Health First Aid or "QPR" (Question, Persuade, Refer), which help bystanders identify and respond to suicidal behaviors. Like resource distribution, conducting these trainings provides a reportable strategy for the agency. They also push accountability to other members of a rural community. This is consistent with agrarian ideals of neighborly interactions and engagement that support "tight knit" rural communities.

In county offices, extension workers are often tasked with conducting direct outreach to farmers, and they, too, position their work as part of the agrarian system. An extension office in Guthrie County, Iowa, regularly delivers bags of mental health resources to farmers. A staff member recounted in an interview:

> We can provide resources and tools to them and pamphlets and it's up to them on how they use it. I have been in a few different people's homes and trucks and they have those magnets on the fridge or in the console or something—so the resources aren't getting thrown away.

Her statements include both the individual's responsibility in that "it's up to them on how they use it," as well as a reflection on the importance of interpersonal relationships. She notes her presence in farmers' homes and trucks. Later she stated, "We meet farmers wherever they are, even in the middle of the field. Sometimes we get to a field and we follow the fence line all the way to the other side to deliver the bags to them." Describing the willingness of staff to follow farmers into their fields and along a fence line also

positions them as embedded in the agricultural community. They have credibility and community connections which are deemed important in agrarian settings.

Like the farming communities they work with, extension workers experience increased stress in the face of natural disasters and hazards such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This is largely due to extension workers' role as first responders to farmers and farm families, often attending to mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, and suicidal ideations and actions. In a 2020 study, Sampson and colleagues explored the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on extension professionals across the country and found that that many were experiencing increased levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns related to their work. Together, these data suggest that an over-reliance on interventions that target farm stress at the individual and interpersonal levels is unsustainable in the long-term, as both groups are susceptible to structural sources of stress. Rather than alleviating the stress of farmers and farm families, these interventions push the stress onto extension workers.

Federal Policy: Seeding Rural Resilience

In 2008, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), part of the USDA, established the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) Program to "provide stress assistance programs to individuals who are engaged in farming, ranching, and other agriculture-related occupations on a regional basis." Programming is focused on improving behavioral health awareness, literacy, and outcomes among these populations.

In 2019, Senators Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and Jon Tester (D-Montana) championed the bipartisan Seeding Rural Resilience Act in effort to address rising suicide rates among farmers and the greater agricultural community. The Seeding Rural Resilience Act created a voluntary stress management program that helps train the Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees (Farm Service Agency, Risk Management Agency, and Natural Resources Conservation Service) to detect stress and destigmatize mental health care (Seeding Rural Resilience Act, 2019). This bill also requires the USDA to collaborate with the Department of Health and Human Services to carry out a $3 million public service announcement campaign to address the mental health of farmers and ranchers. In a 2022 letter to the Secretary of Agriculture and Secretary of Health and Human Services, Senator Grassley cited record inflation as one of the "crushing consequences" of the COVID-19 pandemic (Grassley, 2022). While the USDA predicted that net farm income would increase by 7.2 percent in 2022, inflation levels meant that net farm income actually de-

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creased (Good, 2022). The combination of lost income and rising prices of diesel, fertilizer, and crop protection tools left many family farmers with feelings of "desperation and hopelessness." To manage these stressors, Senator Grassley advocates for "timely implementation" of the Seeding Rural Resiliency Act so that "life-saving" mental health resources can be delivered to rural Americans.

The Seeding Rural Resilience Act expands the reach of the FRSAN by establishing additional programs to mitigate occupational and community related stressors (National Association of Counties, 2020). The Secretary of Agriculture is directed to work with state, local, nongovernmental stakeholders to collaborate and determine programming that best responds to farm and ranch mental stress. In 2021, NIFA announced an investment of $25 million for 50 grants supporting FRSAN State Department of Agriculture projects. Funded projects must "initiate, expand, or sustain programs that provide professional agricultural behavioral health counseling and referral for other forms of assistance as necessary through farm telephone helplines and websites; training programs and workshops; support groups; and outreach services and activities" (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2021).

Across the Midwest, grant projects funded through this mechanism have generally focused on farmer mental health outreach and increasing visibility of available mental health resources. They have found success by way of elevated stress management and mental health awareness among agricultural communities and greater likelihood of farmers and ranchers using available mental health resources. Individual states have varied slightly in their approaches to building stress resilience; the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Bend, Don't Break – Managing Stress in Agriculture project is focused on improving and promoting existing services that help farmers recognize and manage their stress. To achieve this, the MDA is partnering with a variety of agencies who work with farmers. Sub-awardees include the American Indian Community Housing Organization, teaching traditional healing approaches to build resilience among indigenous producers; Big River Farms, planning the 2022 Emerging Farmers Conference and building support for BIPOC farmers; Farmers' Legal Action Group, increasing the number of attorneys who can competently advise producers; Latino Economic Development Center, holding a weekend mental health retreat for 10 Latino farmers; Leech Lake Tribal College, teaching Anishinaabe sustainable life skills to multigenerational family groups of women; Minnesota Dairy Initiative, hosting relationship retreats for farm couples to connect and build support networks; MDA, hosting the Farmer Mental Health Practitioner Conference, establishing and promoting the MN

Farm and Rural Helpline, mental health outreach; Minnesota Department of Health, conducting psychological autopsies on 10 MN farmers who died by suicide and hosting the Suicide Prevention Conference for Faith Leaders; MN Future Farmers of America (FFA), engaging youth in farm stress programming; Red River Farm Network, creating TransFARMation radio series to highlight farmer stress; South Central College, providing training for farm transitions; and University of Minnesota Extension, hosting workshops for coping with ambiguous loss, stress and mental health training for 4-H leaders, and incorporating stress training into existing farm safety programs. General outcomes from this project include increased awareness of mental health and stress management resources among farmers, as well as reported increases in social connection.

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's (IDALS) Farm and Ranch Wellness: Meeting Local Needs project aimed to strengthen local outreach consultations and activities to farmers and their advocates regarding stress assistance programs; recruit farmers and their advocates to attend the Strengthening Families Program; and create a farm resource packet on how to access Iowa State University Extension and Outreach stress assistance and family finance programming. Notable outcomes include increased intentions of using stress assistance programs after viewing farm resource packets, and actual increased utilization of stress assistance programs.

The goal of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture's Behavioral Health Voucher Project was to sustain and expand free behavioral health counseling services for those in agricultural-related occupations; create the Nebraska Rural Response Hotline (administered by the Legal Aid of Nebraska) to offer a behavioral health counseling voucher program, financial and legal counseling, and direct assistance for basic needs; and increase outreach and promotion of these services. There were 3,847 requests for free counseling sessions and 3,763 sessions were attended by the target population. Outreach to rural communities also increased via website creation, and public service announcements about farmer mental health resources aired on five radio stations. The Illinois Department of Agriculture created a six-county pilot project, which was later expanded to include the entire state. This project included a stress hotline, behavioral health counseling vouchers, and provided telehealth counseling services to farming families. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) Expanding and Promoting Wisconsin's Farmer Mental Health Resources program consisted of five major objectives: 1) increase awareness and participation in farmer mental health programming through improved outreach and promotion, 2) expand the DATCP farmer mental health video series, 3) adapt farmer mental health resources to meet the needs of

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Hmong farmers and ensure equitable access, 4) UW-Extension adapt the existing We-Cope stress management program to the specific needs and situations of farmers, and 5) the Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) will offer training to farmers to become peer support specialists for fellow farmers. Notable project outcomes included a 94 percent increase in administered counseling vouchers, expanded audience for promotional efforts, and 25 percent increased call and email volume to the Farm Center.

Characterizing Farmers: An Ethnographic Vignette from Iowa

In early summer 2019, leaders of two Agricultural Safety and Health Centers based at the University of Iowa and the state Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) convened a roundtable of commodity group representatives and rural mental health providers. The goal of the event was to connect mental health providers with people knowledgeable about, and working in, agriculture to fill gaps in knowledge and develop new collaborations. The event had strong support from the IDALS, and the state Secretary of Agriculture personally contacted several commodity groups urging them to send a representative to "this upcoming event on an important issue". Likewise, the chair of the Agricultural Appropriations Committee of the Iowa House of Representatives sent a specific invitation to the president of the Iowa Bankers Association; she sent an RSVP note the morning of the event indicating that she would also attend. This top-down pressure reinforced to the commodity groups the urgency of the situation. It also likely sent a message that it was in their best political interests to appear to be working to get ahead of what was going to be a challenging year in farming.

The meeting ultimately included representation from IDALS, the Iowa Farm Bureau, the Corn Growers, Pork Producers, Poultry, and Soybean Associations, the National Pork Board, and the Iowa Bankers Association. One local grain cooperative sent a representative and a number of crisis response groups, county-level behavioral health departments, and non-profits attended. The meeting was held in Des Moines, in a large boardroom located in sight of the capitol building. A central oval table accommodated the large group.

During introductions, the producer group representatives listed a litany of potential farm stressors. The Corn Growers representative noted that health care affordability is a concern. The Department of Ag employee reported threats of foreign animal diseases (such as African Swine Fever), natural disasters, and flooding. The Farm Bureau representative agreed that floods are a concern. The mental health specialist from the Exten-

sion service noted that farmers were struggling to get loans and that financial issues had "skyrocketed." At this, heads turned toward the president of the Iowa Bankers Association, who did not respond to that directly, but stated, "It's much different than in the '80s, in a positive light, communication is coming earlier. Farmers are being proactive in wanting to find solutions and make decisions about their financial future, and there are more conversations being had." Thus, even when systemic issues are raised as causal factors, the emphasis quickly returned to how individual farmers, through their proactive behavior, should be seen as a positive development.

Other parts of the discussion focused on farmers and the occupation of farming as "unique." The leader of the grain cooperative said, "we all have jobs [with stress] but what does a farmer think about when he's alone planting 600 acres of corn?" The IDALS representative agreed, pointing out that farming is inherently an "isolating" line of work, where people are out of communication with others for long stretches. In addition, she pointed to the pressure of multi-generational farming that looms large over much of the agricultural community. Farms encompass both domestic space and work space, and the fear of being the individual who is responsible for "losing" the farm in an economic crisis is an oft-repeated stressor. Another participant simply said, "these people are just wired differently."

A related theme in the discussion was "stigma" about seeking services in rural communities. A rural mental health provider discussed the strategies her office uses for outreach. She reported that distributing things like "stress balls and jar openers" with their contact information was much more effective. "No farmers are going to take the brochures," she stated, "stigma is still an issue." The Farm Bureau representative agreed, citing results from a national survey conducted by the Farm Bureau that indicated "embarrassment" and "stigma" were two of the three most prominent barriers to seeking mental health treatment (cost being the third).

Given the emphasis on stigma about accessing traditional services, as well as the reality that much of Iowa is a mental health shortage area, the solutions proposed by the group leaned heavily on building community-level capacity to identify stress and crisis and help steer farmers to services. These may include crisis hotlines, faith organizations, or mental health counseling. The providers in the room were divided between those who advocated for QPR training and Mental Health First Aid training. QPR, which stands for "Question, Persuade, Refer," is a one-hour training that helps bystanders, or "gatekeepers" in QPR language, identify signs of stress or crisis, provides them with language to use with people to understand the level of threat, talk with them about finding services,

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and helping them seek treatment. Mental Health First Aid is a longer community training that emphasizes identifying risk factors and warning signs related to mental health and substance use and how to provide aid. The group had a long list of potential targets for these trainings, including barbers, beauticians, servers and bartenders, 4-H and FFA leaders and participants, clergy, veterinarians, grain co-op employees, and spouses.

One concern raised by the group about both QPR and Mental Health First Aid is that neither adequately focus on rural or agricultural populations. Although one of the providers stated that there is a QPR training available for farmers and ranchers, it is not widely available. Another shared feedback that "there were not enough examples that were farmer-related; they need to be more specific to farmers."

A participant who worked with the state extension service pointed out that they have developed an acronym, CORN, "because everyone can remember corn, right?" The message is a way to inform bystanders about how to help people who are in crisis:

> C: Care for others by choosing to engage a person in distress or who may be suicidal
>
> O: Offer support by listening and respectfully ask, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
>
> R: Refer person to helplines, lifelines, or local resources
>
> N: Never leave the person alone or without a plan and never leave the person without hope.

This issue of messaging soon bloomed into a larger discussion that returned to the basic challenge of the issue of "stigma" and individual farmers' identities. One mental health provider asked, "If we are trying to break the stigma of mental health, why are we not using the term *mental health*?" She noted that *stress on the farm*, *crisis*, *financial crisis*, and *stress counseling* were all terms that were "mentioned" in resources she had seen. Others were less concerned about the terminology, noting that the fact people are talking about it is enough, and that it doesn't really matter what we call it. But "what to call it" was put into sharp relief for some participants later in the year; that fall, the State Extension Network began a series of mental health first aid trainings in conjunction with their annual Farm Bill meetings, which help farmers understand the current farm programs offered through the Federal Farm Service Agency. At one meeting in November, when the Extension trainer began the program, 10–15 people immediately left the room when she used the term "suicide prevention."

Back at the roundtable, another provider took a different approach to messaging, musing, "What if we introduced the science of the training and why it is important?" She said, "Farmers are scientists, so should we change the message to focus on the science to get over the stigma?" The Farm Bureau rep liked the idea of promoting the science; he felt it would help people understand that it is a "physical thing," rather than emotional.

At the conclusion of this session, the desire for concise materials that spoke directly to Iowa farmers to inform them of crisis resources were the most palatable solutions. The trainings, which were promoted heavily by the providers in the room, were of interest to the commodity groups, but only in a short form. Several said, "We can't do a day-long training, but could you summarize this information in an hour-long webinar that we could share with our field staff?" The commodity groups also requested small handouts that their field staff could distribute: nothing that was too large or "obvious."

The group asked Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health to produce a small card, based on a youth-focused model shown by a provider at the event, that had signs of stress on one side and crisis resources on the other. The participants were very interested in this product and the center received several requests for it while it was in development from many of the participants.

After the event, a university-based participant reflected on why the commodity groups were so interested in this topic. After all, she pointed out, these same groups have resisted many other safety and health programs, fearing that it would result in too much oversight of farmers. However, most of the solutions proposed were consistent with the existing media focus and grant programs that emphasize the individual. This is particularly salient when thinking about the farming community; after all, they are "unique" and "just wired differently," as noted by one of the roundtable participants.

Focusing on the individual farmer also allows these commodity groups to sidestep their own culpability in the structures of agriculture that contribute to both the economic volatility and the "extreme weather events" that affect individual farmers' situations. In Iowa, most crisis care, disability, and education services are funded through property taxes. Attempts to pass new levies that would redistribute some of these funds to improve access to services in rural areas have been strongly opposed by the Farm Bureau, despite their participation in the mental health event described here. The outcome of the roundtable was palatable to the Farm Bureau: distributing a resource card and encouraging Iowa's "unique", "wired differently" farmers to independently access the care that they need.

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Discussion

Stanley Cohen introduced the idea of *moral panic* to the sociological lexicon (Cohen, 1972). A moral panic is a social phenomenon that is disproportionately seen as a threat to norms or values; often, a moral panic is directed at a deviant group (the "folk devil" in Cohen's term). Garland (2008) added an important element to moral panic, which is the moral dimension of the social reaction, "particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these episodes." Likewise, in his ethnographic work on farmer suicides in India, Daniel Munster argues that Indian farmers used the media attention related to farmer suicide to engage in "moral reflection on their agrarian practices and their farming ethos. Farmers' suicides were widely recognized as symptoms of an ecological, economic [problem], a moral crisis of neoliberalizing agriculture" (Münster, 2016, p. 108). In Iowa, the issue of farmer suicides has certainly come with a degree of moral reflection as a component of the social reaction, as evidenced by national media coverage and policy development. However, in stark contrast to the Indian setting, the Iowan moral reflection emphasizes individualized behaviors among farmers, rather than a critique of neoliberal, extractive agriculture. Even when systemic issues are identified as contributing to the problem, the solutions proposed by agribusiness leaders and rural mental health providers focus on individualized behaviors.

Likewise, the media's focus on the personal stories of farmers and farm families who have experienced suicide obfuscates the complex structural causes of occupational stress in agricultural work settings. Instead, the stories often highlight a grieving spouse who wonders if they could have intervened, or a tight-knit Iowa community forever shattered by the loss of a fellow farmer. While these stories help non-farming populations understand some of the challenges that farm families face, they also present farmers as isolated and distinct from economic and policy systems, rather than embedded in them. This tendency is consistent with agrarian values that identify the farm as the primary unit of production, discrete from broader economic systems (Freyfogle, 2001).

Finally, US federal policy largely addresses farmer mental health by encouraging farmers to seek out services, rather than addressing commodity price structures, trade, or investing meaningfully in climate change mitigation. Addressing psychological stress in the workplace requires attending to the structures of work or interactions that cause stress, rather than only focusing on treating the individual who is suffering from stress (Lazarus, 2020). US federal farm policy has significant impacts on farm markets and practices, but it has thus far not intervened in these in a way that meaningfully pro-

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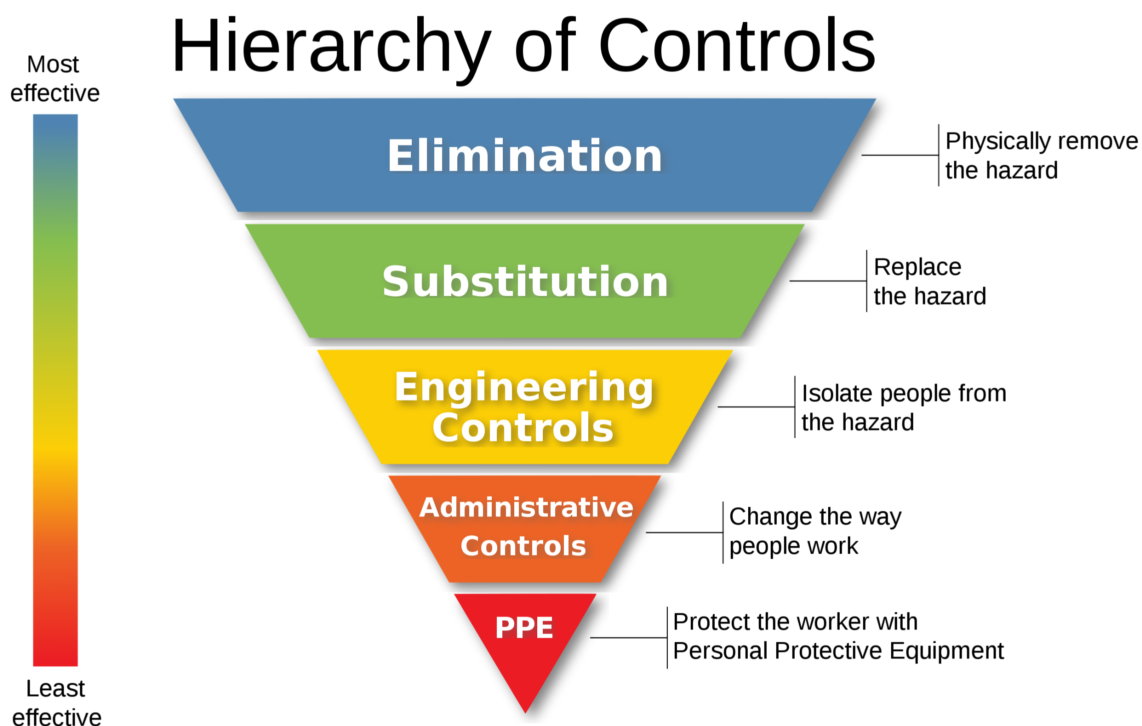
motes farm diversity, creates new markets, or supports new infrastructure that would improve farmers' autonomy or decision making.

The psychosocial hazard of high job demands, particularly those over which the farmer has no control (commodity prices, financial pressures, debt, climate change, government regulation, seasonal conditions), negatively influence farmer mental health and well-being. According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, control measures addressing psychosocial hazards should "follow the same hierarchy as traditional health and safety principles, where interventions addressing the source of the hazard are prioritized." In this approach, control measures affecting a whole organization (or an industry as a whole) are prioritized over measures that individuals may take (Figure 2; Government of Canada, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2022).

Figure 2

The hierarchy of hazard controls (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2023)



Under this framework, we propose that interventions requiring individual action from farmers (using a crisis hotline, attending workshops on mental health) are akin to focusing on personal protective equipment (PPE): an effective way to mitigate psychosocial hazards, but proper use requiring long-term vigilance from the individual, thus increasing the burden on a population that is already experiencing a significant number of stressors. To create a lasting solution to the farmer mental health crisis, we must consid-

er high-level control measures that address the job demands beyond the control of the individual farmer. For example, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety recommends allocating monetary resources to workers to reduce or prevent the impact of psychosocial hazards like financial stress, aligning with the goals of the engineering control level.

In the US, there are few policy solutions that meaningfully increase farmers' control over their occupations or enhance job resources. One exception is the *Local Food Purchase Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA)*, which uses non-competitive cooperative agreements to provide up to $900 million of American Rescue Plan and Commodity Credit Corporation funding for state, tribal, and territorial governments to purchase foods produced within the state or within 400 miles of the delivery destination to help support local, regional, and underserved producers (U.S.D.A, Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program | Agricultural Marketing Service, n.d.). The purpose of the program is to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency. The cooperative agreements allow the states, tribes, and territories to procure and distribute local and regional foods and beverages that are healthy, nutritious, unique to their geographic areas, and that meet the needs of the population. The food will serve feeding programs, including food banks, schools, and organizations that reach underserved communities. Importantly, the program also helps build and expand economic opportunity for local and underserved producers, farmers, and ranchers. Unlike commodity support that mostly provide support to continue producing the same five subsidized products (wheat, corn, rice, soybeans, and corn), the LFPA provides funding that will facilitate farmers growing products that respond to their local communities' needs. Although there has not yet been evaluation of the LFPA in relation to farm stress outcomes, this may be a fruitful topic for future research on farm stress.

Conclusion

Farm-related stress and suicide rates among US farmers have been a consistent concern since the 1980s farm crisis. In addition, reports from the CDC in the 2010s have further heightened awareness of farmer suicides among media, policy makers, and other agricultural support organizations. Despite the national dialogue about this issue, most solutions have focused on individual farmer behaviors, even when systemic causes are identified. The focus on individual behaviors is particularly ironic when promoted by entities, such as federal policy makers and agribusiness leaders, who are in a position to make or advocate for structural changes. We suggest here that a systemic approach

would be more effective, as well as more in line with best practices in occupational health and safety interventions that work to eliminate hazards rather than place the responsibility on individual workers to protect themselves using personal protective equipment or administrative controls. However, we also need more research to understand how farm practices, crop diversity, conservation activities, or other farm strategies interact with mental health. For example, policy initiatives such as the Local Food Purchase Cooperative Agreement Program, which do facilitate new markets and encourage farm diversity, should be evaluated with farmers' mental health and wellbeing in mind. Farmers' experiences with conservation programs that improve soil health or biodiversity should also be examined holistically to better understand how participating in these programs could serve as protective to mental health. Anthropologists are well positioned to engage in this holistic, systemic examination. Ultimately, a systemic approach also requires that stakeholders in the US sidestep the deeply held cultural connection to Jeffersonian Agrarianism, which portrays farmers as purely independent actors, distinct from the economic and policy structures that invisibly drive many of their behaviors, as well as contribute to many of their stressors.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Povzetek

Leta 2016 je ameriški Center za nadzor in preprečevanje bolezni objavil poročilo, v katerem je navedel, da je stopnja samomorov med kmeti 84,5 na 100.000 oseb, kar je štirikrat več kot pri splošnem prebivalstvu in več kot pri drugih poklicnih skupinah z visokim tveganjem, kot so vojaški veterani. Pet mesecev pozneje je bilo poročilo umaknjeno zaradi napake pri razvrščanju v poklicne skupine. Vendar so ga že pred tem povzele nacionalne in svetovne novice, kar je sprožilo takojšen odziv med oblikovalci politik, mediji in kmetijskimi skupinami. Čeprav prekomerni stres v kmetijstvu oblikujejo strukturne okoliščine, kot je spremenljivo gospodarstvo zaradi nestabilne trgovine in nihajočih cen blaga, so rešitve za problematiko samomora med kmeti oblikovane na ravni posameznika, kot so individualna svetovanja in podpore na področju duševnega zdravja. V prispevku presojava nedavne pobude medijev, politike in interakcije med kmetijskimi podpornimi agencijami o problematiki samomora med kmeti. Trdiva, da predlagane rešitve zahtevajo individualno ukrepanje kmetov, kar je v skladu z agrarnimi ideologijami, ki kmete prikazujejo kot izključno neodvisne akterje. S tem oblikovalce politik, posojilodajalce in kmetijska podjetja razbremenjujejo krivde za podporo kmetijski industriji, ki je odgovorna za visoko stopnjo poklicnega stresa med njenimi najpomembnejšimi udeleženci.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: samomor med kmeti, kmetijska politika ZDA, duševno zdravje kmetov

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