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## Problem Drinking among transnational mexican migrants: Exploring migrant Status and Situational Factors

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### Abstract

We present research finding son problem drinking among transnational Mexican migrants employed in the mushroom industry of southeastern Pennsylvania. Our research explored the relationship between situational factors—living arrangements, social isolation, and peer pressure to drink—and problem drinking. Individual characteristics of the migrants, such as age, education level, migration history, and work experience in the mushroom industry are also considered. The premise of our study is that the migrants' judicial status in the country—as foreign solo men and, at times, undocumented or illegal migrants—places them at a high risk to binge drink. The men mainly live without their families in relatively isolated, grower-provided housing or overcrowded apartment units for months, if not years, away from traditional community and kin deterrents to heavy drinking. We employed the ethnographic method in two complementary field studies: a community ethnography, designed to identify the community context of problem drinking, and a series of case studies of migrant drinkers, designed to identify the relationships between situational factors and problem drinking. Focus groups were used to explore and verify the findings being generated in the two studies. Our findings reveal that there is an alcohol abuse problem among the migrants as a consequence of situational and other factors, such as festive occasions, bad news from home, and a long workweek. Their binge drinking does not always result in negative behavior because the migrants follow drinking norms, and violators of these norms are dealt with accordingly. Nonetheless, binge drinking does place them at a high risk for negative behavior, which results in problems in their housing units and in local communities.

### Keywords

Mexican farmworkers; transnational migrants; farmworkers; problem drinking; binge drinking; Mexican migrants

### Introduction

There is a dearth of research on the drinking behavior of transnational migrants in the United States. These migrants work in the United States, often for years, but their permanent home base, where their families remain, is in another country. Specifically, the associated with their migrant status as solo foreign and non-immigrant workers, has not yet been examined in the alcohol literature in either the United States or Mexico (Garcia and Gondolf 2004). Consequently, we fail to understand that the drinking of these migrants is a result of situational and other stresses in the United States that they may not necessarily share with other farmworkers.

We present our findings on the relationship between complexity of their drinking, situational factors associated with migrant status (e.g., non-traditional living arrangements and

isolation) and problem drinking among transnational Mexican migrants. These factors, we argue, place the migrants at risk for drinking. We begin by introducing our research problem and our migration and migrant status paradigm, which departs from conventional approaches in alcohol studies. We continue with a discussion of the ethnographic method used in the study, describing our use of a community ethnography, case studies, and focus groups to gather qualitative data. Next, we present our findings. In addition to demonstrating the relationship between situational factors and binge drinking, we consider the relationship between drinking and individual and other contributing factors. We end with recommendations calling for innovative prevention measures that consider migrant drinking a consequence of economic forces and immigration laws that dislocate the migrants from their families and communities in Mexico and isolate them in a stressful living and working environment for years.

### Research Problem

The major objectives of our study were to describe the association between situational factors (i.e., living arrangements, peer pressure, and social isolation) and problem drinking, and to explore the role of individual (i.e., demographic background, education level, English language proficiency, employment, and migration experience) and other social factors (e.g., density of alcohol outlets in the area) to drinking. We defined problem drinking as “binge drinking” associated with negative behaviors, such as infractions of the law and work problems. In accordance with Kusserow (1991), Schulenberg et. al. (1996), and Weschsler, Austin, and Schuckit (1998), binge drinking occurs with five or more drinks (e.g., a glass of wine, bottle of beer, or a shot glass of liquor) over three to four hours—thresholds at which there is an increased risk for alcohol-related negative behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

The “migrant status” of the transnational Mexican workers, we argue, places them at a high risk for binge drinking. These workers leave Mexico without their families and stay in the United States for months, if not years, because of the high monetary and human costs associated with crossing the United States-Mexico border, especially if the crossing is unauthorized. In the United States, they reside in non-traditional housing, socially if not physically isolated from local communities. Absent in these living arrangements are traditional family- and community-based deterrents to heavy drinking. These deterrents, described elsewhere (Garcia and Gonzalez n.d.), include community sanctions against alcohol abuse, the presence of male kin-based authority figures, a familial support base. The status of some of the migrants as an “illegal” in the country also makes them vulnerable at the work site and leads to anxiety about their perceived lack of rights in the country. Together, these and other migrant status-related stresses contribute to binge drinking.

### Transnational Mexican Farmworkers and Alcohol Research

Estimates on the number of seasonal farmworkers in the United States range from 1.6 to 2.5 million (Greenhouse 1998; Housing Assistance Council 1996). Conservative estimates, by the National Agricultural Workers Survey, place the percentage of foreign-based migrants between 40 to 50 percent (United States Department of Labor 2001). The majority are from the Central Plateau Region of Mexico, but since the 1980s, they are increasingly from other regions (Cross and Sandos 1981; Massey et. al. 1987; Mines, Mullenx, and Saca 2001).<sup>2</sup> In the United States Southwest, these migrants have comprised the bulk of the vegetable and

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<sup>1</sup>We based our definition on our assumptions that binge drinking results in negative behaviors. However, as we discovered, binge drinking does not necessarily result in these outcomes. It should also be noted that, according to Weschsler et al. (1998), five or more drinks constitutes binge drinking for men only. The cutoff for women starts at four or more drinks. Given that our study focuses on males, we use the five or more drinks measure. Additionally, our definition of problem drinking combines two drinking behaviors treated separately in the literature: quantity (i.e., number of drinks consumed over time) and outcomes (negative behaviors associated with quantity).

fruit harvesters since World War II (Galarza 1977; Palerm 1991; Rouse 1992). Over the last two decades, outside of this region they have complemented, if not replaced, local farmworkers and migrants from Appalachian states, Texas, and Florida (Veléz-Ibáñez and Sampaio 2002; García 1997; Griffith and Kissam 1995; Heppel and Amendola 1992).

Despite the growing presence of transnational migrants in the United States farm labor force, we found no studies on the drinking of these farmworkers in our extensive search of the literature (see García and Gondolf 2004). Comprehensive reviews of alcohol studies on United States Latinos in general, by Gilbert and Cervantes (1986) and Gilbert (1992), missed this population altogether. Most of the work on migrant drinking (e.g., Chi 1989; Chi and McClain 1989; Morales 1985; Trotter 1985; Watson et. al. 1985), which is also limited, appears to center on United States-based domestic migrants.<sup>3</sup> If transnational Mexican migrants were included in these studies, they were not identified as such.

The existing studies point to situational factors as the causes behind problem drinking. Chi (1989) and Chi and McClain (1989), for example, found that more drinking took place among migrants in labor camps than in their home communities. In the camps, single males, particularly those who grew up with kin who drank alcohol regularly, were regular drinkers. Males accompanied by families were occasional or non-drinkers. Watson and his associates (1985) found that older men often drank because they were bored and suffered from desperation as a result of their uncertainty of the future. Younger men were protected by their families through a degree of social cohesion and stability. Morales (1985) and Trotter (1985) support the findings of their colleagues. Migrants traveling without their families had a propensity for being binge drinkers (consuming five or more drinks at a single setting). They also found that employer sanctions against drinking during the workday kept many of the men from drinking during the week. All of these studies indicate and that unaccompanied workers drink heavily because they are isolated, lonely, and far from their families.

By concentrating on United States domestic migrants, rarely have these researchers attempted to comprehend alcohol abuse in terms of the specific dynamics of the global economy and international labor migration of solo workers. Instead, their studies, as well as the literature on alcohol abuse and United States Latinos (e.g. Caetano 1987; Neff, Hoppe, and Perea 1987), place migrant heavy drinking within the context of the solitary way of life of some farmworker migrants, or within a framework of acculturation and normative drinking within cultural patterns. We need to expand our analytical aperture and interpret the drinking behavior of transnational Mexican migrants within the wider, macro perspective associated with transnational labor migration. This interpretation will reveal that the situational conditions, identified in the studies on United States-based domestic migrants, are more intensive and complex for transnational migrants and place them at a higher risk for drinking. Transnational migrants are away from their homeland for an extended number of months, if not years, living in non-traditional housing. They are without their families and without the support systems of their established communities. Social ties between the migrants and immigrant relatives in local communities, if any, are tenuous, as will be

<sup>2</sup>The Central Plateau Region is a basin within the Cordilleran highlands in central Mexico. Increasing population pressure and a fragile land-tenure system in this region have stimulated a massive migration to Mexican cities, the United States, and, recently, Canada. The “core-sending states” in this vast area are Durango, Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon. Peasants from these eight states have migrated and immigrated to the United States since the turn of the century (Cross and Sandos 1981; Massey et al. 1987).

<sup>3</sup>United States-based migrants live permanently in the United States, mainly in Texas, Florida, and, in the past, Puerto Rico. These migrants are United States citizens or legal/authorized immigrants from Mexico and, to a lesser extent, from Central America. They are seasonal migrants; they leave their homes and return in the same year. Starting in the spring, men, as well as entire families, travel to different regions of the country to work in the fields, orchards, and vineyards, returning to their homes in late fall, if not sooner.

described. Socially isolated, away from kin-based deterrents to problem drinking, and vulnerable to peer pressure, migrants may end up drinking for solidarity and camaraderie.

Migrant status also aggravates work related stress. Since transnational workers do not return home frequently, they remain under work duress for a prolonged period of time. Illegal or undocumented migrants tolerate long work hours, unsafe working conditions, and low wages for fear of losing their jobs. Work related stress and nontraditional living situations have a compounding affect on their drinking behaviors and lead to more drinking over time.

## Methods

We used a community ethnography and case studies to examine the role of situational, background, and other factors in the drinking of transnational migrants. Towards the end, we added focus groups to verify our findings. Given the exploratory nature of the study, we employed the ethnographic method, and our findings are based on the analytical process inherent in this approach.

## Research Site and Population

We carried out our research among the Mexican migrants employed as harvesters in the mushroom industry of Southern Chester County, Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, we centered our research efforts in Kennett Square and the area within a two-mile radius of the borough, which included Toughenamon and parts of the municipalities of Kennett and New Garden. This general area has the largest concentration of mushroom production facilities, (or “doubles” as they are known locally), migrants and migrant housing, and businesses that sell alcohol.<sup>5</sup> We were familiar with the region because we lived in Kennett Square and conducted ethnographic research for eight months from 1993 to 1994, and over the years, we have maintained contact with some of our migrant and immigrant key informants in the area (see Garcia 1997 see Garcia 2002). Through these contacts, we easily reestablished ourselves and regained entry into the Mexican-origin community.<sup>6</sup>

Southern Chester County, a major mushroom producing region of the country, covers the lower one-third of the county and is comprised of 20 municipalities. Small boroughs and townships, all under 6,000 inhabitants, set this semi-rural area apart from the remainder of the county. About 80 percent of the mushroom growers in the county are found here. Among them are a dozen ex-migrants of Mexican-origin who are new producers in the area. Annually, an estimated 4,400 harvesters, the majority of whom are transnational migrants from Mexico, are employed in the mushroom industry (García 2006). They are solo males

<sup>4</sup>Real names of communities, municipalities, school districts, community organizations, and major roads will be used in this report. However, the identity of migrants, labor housing compounds, mushroom companies, bars, and small businesses will be protected with pseudonyms. When pseudonyms are used, the reader will be informed. General descriptions of housing units or areas, as opposed to specific descriptions that may give away their identity and locations, will provide further protection.

<sup>5</sup>A “double” is a cinder block structure with few, if any, windows used to grow mushrooms. It is rectangular in shape and measures 8,000 square feet. It is called a double because the structure is divided into halves—and production in one half may differ from production in the other, allowing for the growing of different varieties in each side. Agaricus mushrooms, the common white button variety sold in grocery stores across the country, account for the majority of the mushrooms grown. However, with each passing year, growers at both ends of the production spectrum, large and small, are producing portobellos, shitakes, oysters, and other specialty varieties. Unlike crops grown outdoors and subjected to the whims of Mother Nature, mushrooms are grown indoors, under controlled temperature, humidity, and light conditions. Besides controlling the flushes (the spawning and growth of mushrooms), this artificial growing environment allows producers to grow and harvest mushrooms every month of the year. The mushrooms are grown on platforms or *camas* (beds), as the growers call them, to use the vernacular of the workers. These platforms are constructed of wood and hold the compost on which the mushroom spawn is placed and cultivated (see García 1997, García 2000, and García and González 1995 for further information about the mushroom industry in Southern Chester County).

<sup>6</sup>The term “Mexican-origin” is used to identify Mexican citizens (migrants and immigrants) and American citizens of Mexican descent.

who are in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. The Mexican women in the region are immigrants who, if employed in the industry, mainly pack and process mushrooms (García and González 1995).

The majority of the transnational migrants in the region live in grower-provided housing located in farm labor compounds, or *campos* as the workers refer to them in Spanish. The compounds are situated near mushroom production facilities, away from local townships and boroughs. The number of housing units in these compounds ranges from two to eight. By far, the majority of the units are add-ons—cinder block structures added to an existing double or mushroom production unit. The dormitory is only separated from the work site by a wall of cinder blocks. Two to six occupants share small add-on dorms. Medium size dorms house seven to 12 occupants, and large dorms can house 12 or more. Cottages, trailers, and mobile homes are also used as housing, but are usually occupied by managers and their families. Some of the compounds—those with space—have barbeque pits, picnic tables, and makeshift soccer fields.

The residents of these housing units live and work together for months, if not years, but do not form a single household unless they are immediate kin. In general, each occupant shares in the living expenditures and prepares and consumes meals either alone or with dorm or roommates. Residents in larger housing units (i.e., 12 or more occupants) hire a cook to prepare their meals.

Migrants with immigrant kin in the communities may reside with their relatives if space permits. Too often, however, immigrant families live in overcrowded conditions and are unable to accommodate additional dwellers.

### Community Ethnography

We started our fieldwork with a community ethnography in order to gain some background knowledge of the drinking practices and contexts of the transnational migrants. The ethnography covered farm labor housing compounds along with the communities of Kennett Square and Toughkenamon, where some migrants live in apartments or other rentals, shop in grocery stores, buy alcohol, visit immigrant relatives, and worship in local churches. The objectives of the community ethnography were to bring farmworker data (e.g., the number of mushroom growers and farm labor housing compounds) collected in our 1993–1994 research up-to-date, and to gather information on the nature of problem drinking among migrants. Research was conducted from August 1999 through July 2001, initially while living in Kennett Square later over three-day weekends.

**Key informants**—We recruited 21 key informants for the community ethnography. Attempts were made to recruit at least one key informant from each of 24 farm labor housing arrangements in and around the delineated research area. In all, there were 18 grower-provided housing units (15 comprised of a number of add-ons and three cottages, each in different farm labor compounds) and six apartments. However, we were only able to select key informants from 21 of the living arrangements because residents in three of the arrangements did not want to participate in the study. The 21 key informants were recruited using judgment sampling, in which research subjects are chosen on the basis of the researcher's knowledge of the research population. We drew on our existing workforce database to recruit key informants who represent, as best as possible, the demographic background, migration patterns, and other characteristics of the transnational migrants in the region. The database was compiled during previous research in the area and on information from our informal interviews with migrants, management staff of the mushroom companies, and directors and staff of community-based organizations. All of the key informants had to be known drinkers and willing to share their stories about and observations of the drinking



in their camps or apartments. Judgment sampling was appropriate, if not ideal, because it is common in exploratory ethnographic research (Bernard 2002).

In the community ethnography, we used observations, informal interviews, and focus group interviews in the following ways:

**Observations**—We made general and specific observations of migrant drinking on a daily basis. General observations were made in Kennett Square and in surrounding communities, at restaurants and bars patronized by the migrants, and at dances and baptism receptions. Specific observations of migrant drinking were made when visiting our key informants at their places of residence. We paid specific attention to their drinking practices, such as who drinks, what kind of alcohol is ingested, and how much alcohol is consumed per drinking episode. Activities and behaviors associated with drinking also gave us insight into the contexts in which drinking occurs. We did not drink with our informants because we did not want to send mixed messages about alcohol consumption. After a few attempts to get us to drink early in the project, they did not insist later on.

**Informal Interviews**—Informal interviews were conducted with mushroom industry representatives, community organizations that serve the local Latino community, and key informants. Industry and community organization inquiries centered on the drinking behavior of migrants and the problems arising from their drinking, as well as on policies and programs designed to address the problems. Key informants and their housing mates were questioned about why they and their peers drink, how much and under what circumstances, when and where, and what problems arise from their drinking. Included were inquiries of drinking activities, proper drinking behavior, and sanctions against those who do not adhere to drinking norms. Additionally, the informants were questioned about their relationships with local kin and friends, and the availability and use of social and recreational activities.

**Focus Group Interviews**—Two migrant focus groups were held toward the end of the community ethnography. Drawing on observations and informal interviews, a dozen questions were developed to explore drinking among the migrant population in greater detail—their alcohol use and consumption patterns, drinking behaviors, and consequences of breaching drinking norms. Focus group participants—no more than 12 in each focus group—were recruited to represent the migrant housing units within the two-mile radius from Kennett Square. Measures were taken to ensure that no two participants were from the same housing unit and that each participant had resided in the area for at least six months. Newcomers, we believed, would not be as knowledgeable of the drinking among their peers as someone who had lived locally for some time.

## Case Studies

From June through November 2001, we selected 15 case studies from among our 21 key informants to examine, in-depth, the causal relationship between the factors identified earlier and drinking. The 15 cases were well within our research means and provided us with a good representation of the transnational migrants in the region and the drinking types among them.

**Case Study Participants**—As detailed in Table 1: Background Information, our 15 key case study participants ranged in age from 19 to 67 years, and two-thirds were married. Their formal education was from two to seven years. Nearly all of the men were peasants in Mexico. Eleven were from Guanajuato and the others were from Mexico, Jalisco, and Zacatecas. At the time of the study, as indicated in Table 2: Migration Status and Patterns, two-thirds were undocumented or illegal workers. The remainder were legal. Nearly all of

them were experienced mushroom harvesters. All of the case studies, with the exception of one, had migrated to Southern Chester County more than once. Some had worked in California, Texas, Illinois, and New Jersey.

We used a variation of cluster and judgment sampling to narrow the number of migrant housing units from which we drew our case studies. Conventionally, cluster sampling is a technique wherein the entire population is divided into groups, or “clusters,” and a random sample of these clusters is selected (Bernard 1998). This type of sampling is typically used when the researcher cannot get a complete list of the members in a research population but can identify groups or “clusters” in the population, or when a random sample would produce a list of subjects so widely scattered over an area that surveying them would prove to be far too time consuming and expensive (Bernard 1998). The 21 living arrangements from which we drew our key informants were divided into five clusters—farm labor compounds with small, medium, and large add-ons, cottages, and apartments. We selected our case studies from each of the housing units in the clusters: eight add-ons (two of each size), three cottages, and four apartments. Two major criteria—size (i.e., number of occupants) and location (i.e., distance from Kennett Square)—were considered in the selection. Size was considered to assess differences in drinking according to the number of occupants and location to see if migrants living a distance from the borough suffer from greater social and physical isolation than those living nearby and consequently drink more heavily.

Drawing on our knowledge of the migrant population and our information of residents in the housing units, we made efforts to include in our selection the range of transnational migrants found in the area. The migrants’ age, marital status, and educational levels were important criteria. We also made sure to select different types of drinkers in the migrant population. Another important criterion was the workers’ migration experience. Whether or not migrants had kin in and around the research site was also taken into consideration in the selection process.

**Ethnographic Interviews**—The case study participants were interviewed using an ethnographic interview guide—a 12-page standardized questionnaire made up of both close-ended and open-ended questions—designed to gather in-depth information on a number of alcohol-related subjects. We developed it from information gathered in the community ethnography, and included the Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (SMAST), a diagnostic tool for assessing the possibility of alcohol problems.<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire was administered in a single sitting, and if needed, we followed up to obtain elaborations or clarify discrepancies. The genealogies of the case study participants were also drawn up and used in the ethnographic interviews to make inquiries about the drinking history of family members and other relatives. We also used them as visual aids to identify kinship networks in Southern Chester County and to inquire about the emotional support and economic aid received from their relatives.

### Focus Groups

Although not part of the original research design, we decided to add four focus groups at the end to verify findings from the case studies and to uncover other factors behind the drinking of the migrants. Questions centered on living arrangements and peer pressure to drink,

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<sup>7</sup>The SMAST is a diagnostic tool used in combination with others in clinical settings to assess the possibility of alcohol problems. It is one of the standard tests that doctors and drug counselors use for this purpose. Thirteen questions make up the test in which the respondent answers “yes” or “no.” One point is assessed to each question in which the respondent answered “yes” and at the end classified according to the number of affirmative answer. Individuals who answered one question in the affirmative answers, “possible alcoholic”; and three or more affirmative “alcoholic.” SMAST scores are not always accurate and definitive but they are indicators of a possible alcohol problem.

loneliness and social isolation, work schedules and drinking patterns, and problem drinking as viewed by the migrants themselves. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from eight to 12. They were recruited from the housing clusters used to select the case study participants. Measures, similar to those in the first two focus groups, were taken to ensure that the participants were not from the same housing unit and that they had resided in the area for at least six months.

## Findings

We found that the case study participants and their housing mates drink every day. Beer is their preferred alcoholic beverage. The work regime determines the weekly drinking pattern of the migrants. Binge drinking starts on Friday afternoon, immediately after work or in the evening, and continues through Saturday night. The men limit their drinking on Sunday—aware that it will be difficult to meet the harvest quotas with a hangover. On the surface, it appears that the work schedule serves as a protective factor against heavy drinking. Closer examination, however, reveals that it only delays binge drinking, which is seen as a reward for enduring a long work week.

Beer is preferred because the men believe that this alcoholic beverage allows them to socialize and converse. It does not “hit” them as fast or as “hard” as a distilled drink, such as tequila. Distilled drinks, they fear, get them inebriated too fast and interfere with social drinking. Some of the men consume distilled spirits, such as tequila, with their beer, but not as frequently and not in high quantities. The comparatively higher cost of tequila was not cited as a reason for not drinking tequila. In Mexico, according to accounts, the men also prefer beer, and tequila is mainly consumed only during special occasions, such as a baptism, a birthday, or a wedding.

Our observations revealed that the men could obtain beer without paying for it directly. In one practice, the workers who earned the most money for the week purchased beer for the entire harvest crew. In another, a rotation was in place in which one or two workers would pay for the beer each week. Another way to pay for beer was for crew members and housing mates to contribute money into a *coperacha* (coffer) to buy beer at the end of the week. Still another practice was for harvest crews to compete for beer. The crew that harvested the least at the end of the week provided beer for the winning crews. Some foremen also rewarded crews that harvested the most poundage with beer.

Drinking on the weekends is a social activity with a recreational dimension. According to the men, alcohol is used to relax and create a jovial ambiance that allows them to enjoy their time off from the harvest. Drinking is a group activity open to anyone at the camp or place of residence, including visitors. Housing mates and visitors congregate in a common area to drink, either inside of the housing unit or outside under a tree or around a picnic table. The beer is always nearby in a refrigerator or in an ice cooler, and is shared with everyone regardless of whether or not they contributed to its purchase. If the number of beers is running low, volunteers will go out and purchase more cases. The men converse and joke, especially as the amount of beer ingested increases over the course of the evening. Initially, the conversations center around work and the events of the week, and as the evening progresses, they become nostalgic and center on family, friends, and the homeland. Music in the background does not drown out the animated discussions. Some of the men divide into small groups and play cards or dominos, while others stand behind them watching the action and holding conversations of their own. As it gets late, some of the men retire or leave (in the case of visitors) and the size of the group diminishes. At the end, there are only two or three men who continue to drink.



## Binge Drinking

The binge drinkers among the key informants in the community ethnography and the case study participants can be categorized into three general types: the recreational binge drinker, the habitual binge drinker, and the episodic binge drinker. These categories are arbitrary and serve to give an idea of the type of binge drinkers found among the migrants. The recreational-binge drinker may drink during the workweek and binge drinks with friends over the weekends but not necessarily every weekend. The habitual binge drinker drinks moderately during the workweek (a couple of beers after work) and binge drinks on the weekends. The episodic/alcoholic binge drinker is incapable of having one drink because of his inability to stop drinking. Knowing this, he tries not to drink for weeks, months, including years, but when he gives in to temptation, he binges and continues to drink heavily for days.

The following examples, based on our case studies, illustrate the three types of binge drinkers:

**Recreational Binge Drinking Case**—Miguel is a 28-year-old married undocumented, or illegal, worker from Zacatecas, Mexico. His wife and four children recently joined him without proper immigration documents. Miguel only completed the second grade, but learned how to read and write with the help of friends. He speaks a little English, but with a heavy accent. He has worked for the same mushroom company since arriving nearly two years ago. Along with his 70 co-workers, all of them from Guanajuato, he works anywhere from 75 to 80 hour weeks. Prior to arriving in Southern Chester County, he worked as a farmworker in California in the 1980s and in Florida from 1993 to 1996. Although his family resides in the area, he lives in a labor camp with eight other workers, among them his father-in-law. Besides his family and father-in-law, he identified four close friends in the region who he sees about once a week.

Miguel's drinking oscillates from an occasional drinker to an occasional recreational binge drinker. His last drinking episode was about a month ago, and on that occasion he consumed three or four beers. Before the arrival of his family, he would consume up to a six-pack per week, and during some weekends, he would give in to peer pressure and binge drink. Some of his campmates drink every weekend, while a few others abstain altogether. Miguel's SMAST score of two points falls in SMAST definition of "possible alcoholic."

**Habitual Binge Drinker Case**—Felipe is a 22 year-old single undocumented, or illegal, worker from Moroleón, Guanajuato. He is the middle child of seven siblings. Of all the case studies, Felipe is the only one who has an education beyond the sixth grade, but only by one year. He claims not to speak English, although he understands it. In 1993, at the age of 15, Felipe made his first trip to Southern Chester County. Since then, he has been employed by the same mushroom company in Avondale, and works from 70 to 75 hours per week, year around. Every other year he returns to his homeland. He harvests with 20 other men from his home state, none of whom are related to him. Felipe lives in a two-bedroom apartment with five friends and a cousin. He also has two uncles in Avondale whom he visits once a week, and uncles in Newark whom he does not see as often. Felipe identified five good friends in the area.

Felipe is a habitual binge drinker. He drinks lightly after work, one or two beers, but on the weekends he consumes up to eight to 10 beers. His SMAST score was eight points, which falls in the SMAST definition of "alcoholic."

**Episodic Binge Drinking**—Sixty-seven-year-old Guillermo, or Memo as his friends call him, is the oldest case study participant. He is married with three adult daughters in Mexico,

each one married with families. Like many *campesinos* (farmworkers) of his generation, instead of going to school, *Don* Guillermo tilled the land with his father in a small village in Guanajuato. After working as an undocumented or illegal worker for years, he regularized his status through the Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) Program in the late 1980s, and is now a Green Card holder.<sup>8</sup> *Don* Guillermo has worked for only two mushroom employers over the last 22 years, and currently lives with seven other farmworkers in an add-on. On average, he and his 30 crewmates work 60 hours per week. He has also worked in many areas of the United States, among them Texas, Michigan, and Arizona, which is not surprising since he started to migrate as a *bracero* (unskilled) worker in the late 1940s.

*Don* Guillermo has not consumed alcohol in a year. He is an episodic binge drinker, and is incapable of having only one drink. Knowing this, he abstains. However, when he drinks, he binge drinks for days. In his last drinking episode, he consumed tequila, nearly an entire half-liter bottle. At eight points, his SMAST score is high and falls within the SMAST definition of “alcoholic.” He admits that he has a drinking problem.

From one week to another, the number of binge drinkers in any given housing unit varies. In the 15 housing units of the case studies, for example, the number of core binge drinkers ranges from 30 to 50 percent. When the occasional binge drinkers or episodic/alcoholic binge drinkers join in, the percentage may be as high as 80 percent. Availability of beer, a birthday celebration, the return of a kinsman, or a hefty paycheck are some of the reasons for the increase in their numbers. Watching a boxing match or some other sporting event also contributes to the increment. The majority of the binge drinkers are in their 20s, 30s, and to a lesser extent in their 40s and 50s.

Little evidence of problem drinking as defined earlier was observed. The men binge drink, but their drinking does not always result in unruly behavior or trouble. In most cases, after ingesting a large quantity of alcohol and becoming visibly inebriated, the individual will simply go to bed. Nonetheless, binge drinking does place the drinkers and others in peril. For example, regular binge drinking over time leads to serious health problems such as cirrhosis of the liver and accidents that result in disabling injuries. Reporting to work after a night of heavy drinking also endangers the drinker and others. The worker may cut himself or a fellow worker or may slip and fall, injuring himself to the point of becoming disabled. Often, as we discovered, because of the fear of being dismissed from work or because of unauthorized immigration status, alcohol-related injuries are not reported, unless the injury is extremely severe.

### Situational Factors

Binge drinking, as argued earlier, is a consequence of the transnational workers’ migrant status in the country. These migrants live away from their family, close kin, and other important community deterrents to drinking for months, if not years. Instead, they live with other solo men and find themselves in unfamiliar living situations that contribute to drinking. The specific situational factors we examined in our research are living arrangements, peer pressure, and social isolation. Living arrangements include the type of housing unit, number of occupants in the unit, and the kinship relationship among the occupants, if any. Peer pressure is defined as encouraging an individual to drink when he is reluctant to participate in this activity. We consider social isolation to be the absence of contact with local kin and friends in the region, and the lack of social activities accessible to

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<sup>8</sup>The Special Agricultural Workers Program (SAW) was a legalization program of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). It was implemented to legalize illegal immigrant and migrant farmworkers who could demonstrate that they had performed at least 90 days of agricultural labor in the United States in the years preceding the enactment of IRCA.

the migrant population, such as going to a movie or attending a church function, including worship services.

**1. Living Arrangements**—The 15 case study participants lived in and around Kennett Square, Avondale, and Toughkenamon; 11 in housing found in farm labor compounds and the remainder in apartments (see Table 3: Residence in Southern Chester County). The number of housing mates ranged from five to 15 in the seven add-ons; from eight to 22 in the three cottages; and from six to 12 in the four apartments. In all of the housing units, some of the housing mates are related to one another. Eleven of the case study participants were related to some of their housing mates. Brothers are the primary kin, followed by fathers, uncles and cousins.

Nearly all of the case study participants did not reside with kinsmen who, in their hometowns in Mexico, help to moderate the drinking of young men. Fathers, uncles, godfathers, and, to a lesser extent, older brothers reinforce established drinking norms that only permit heavy drinking under certain circumstances, such as a wedding, religious ceremony, or funeral, and that call for proper decorum, such as not insulting fellow drinkers and family members or looking for a fight. Studies conducted in rural Mexico, such as the work of DeWalt (1979), Natera (1987), and Navarrete (1988), identify under what circumstances heavy drinking occurs. Male kinsmen intervene when their male relatives violate drinking norms and remind them of proper drinking behavior and, when needed, forcefully remove them from bars and take them to their respective homes (Garcia and Gonzalez n.d.). Transnational migrants with these kinsmen as housing mates do not binge drink on a frequent basis and follow proper drinking norms. These migrants come from a rural and traditional culture that, although changing due to migration (see Salgado de Snyder 1993), still calls for respecting their elders (Garcia and Gonzalez n.d.).

From the informal interviews with the key informants in the community ethnography, ethnographic interviews with case study participants, and focus interviews, we learned that the close proximity of the housing units to the work places contributes to drinking. The men who reside in the add-ons, in which only a cinder block wall separates their living quarters from the work site, are unable to distance themselves from work at the end of the day. Inability to distance themselves, according to the migrants, results in work-related anxiety off the job, described as a heightened concern or uneasiness over pending work. Irregular hours and working conditions add to this uneasy feeling. Hours are often unpredictable, as producers wait for optimal product size before harvesting. The number of hours per day may range from four to 16 hours.

The interviews also revealed that the fast pace and physical exertion of the harvest contributes to the migrants' work-related stress and anxiety. The men are expected to keep up with their crews and meet daily harvest quotas without damaging or bruising the picked mushrooms.<sup>9</sup> They move about and work in relatively dark and moist environments, securing their footing on wet ground long enough to fit part of their torsos between the mushroom beds and to reach for and remove small clusterings of mushrooms and trimming the stems with a sharp knife. They must take care not to "cluster" pick mushrooms, in order to produce optimum sizing and yields in the next flush (growth of mushrooms). The workers speak of a *calientura* (fever) associated with the grueling nature of the harvest. It is described, in physiological terms, as a low-grade fever, back and neck tension, and, in some cases, a rapid heart beat. These symptoms are particularly present after a long workday, and may also be accompanied by sore muscles and exhaustion that interferes with rest and results in a restless sleep.

The case study participants, as listed in Table 4: Current Employment, worked from 35 to 85 hours per week. A brief description of the typical week in some of the companies they work for provides an idea of the grueling work schedule of the men. The workweek begins on Monday and runs at least through Friday, if not Saturday afternoon. The workday begins at 3:00 a.m., when the workers awake and prepare themselves for work. After a cup or two of coffee and breakfast, the workers report for work at 4:00 a.m. The workday varies; on some days they work for four hours, while on other days, they labor up to 18 hours. They take a half hour or more for lunch and a couple of breaks. After work, the men bathe, have dinner, and, if time permits, watch television until 9:00 p.m.

On days off, Saturdays and Sundays, the camp takes on a community character. The camp occupants clean the common area, bathrooms, and their sleeping quarters. Clothes also are washed, dried, and stored away. If they have a vehicle or access to local public transportation, they may visit friends or make a trip into Kennett Square to shop and buy beer. With little else to do, nowhere to go, and few outsiders to talk to, the men often drink beer to pass the time on Saturday nights and Sundays.

Life in the camps, as the case study participants shared with us, can be an anxiety-ridden experience. With little rest time between work shifts and no recreational activities to relieve anxiety and stress, migrants turn to drinking to relax.

It helps to create an ambiance of camaraderie, albeit for only a few hours.

**2. Social Isolation**—The migrants are physically and socially isolated in Southern Chester County. In the camps, the case study participants, for example, live away from local boroughs and towns and do not have a reliable means of transportation; if they live in apartment complexes in local communities, the migrants are isolated socially. In neighborhoods, the solo men are looked upon with suspicion by local residents, including immigrant families. The men are made to feel like outsiders. All 15 case study participants had kin or close friends, many of them from their hometowns, in the region. However, despite these relationships, the men did not visit them on a regular basis. In some instances, the demanding work schedules of both parties, along with the family responsibilities of immigrants did not permit frequent visits. In other cases, conflicts keep them apart.

Back home, the migrants are primarily from rural, kin-based communities where everyone knows one another and, when possible, help each other. In Southern Chester County, the migrants are unable to recreate community-based social relationships, despite the presence of immigrant kin. At best, the closest social group of the migrants is comprised of kin and friends with whom they live, work, and interact on a regular basis. Their non-kin housing and work mates are *cuates* (twins) or friends of *confianza* (worthy of trust), to use the migrants' vernacular. However, these friendships are not the solution to the migrants' physical and social isolation. It is their common plight that draws them into bonds of friendship, and when they get together, the men console themselves and lament their predicament by drinking.

Keeping in touch with their families in Mexico is also not easy for the men, as the case study participants revealed. They and their family members are semi-illiterate, and consequently, do not correspond regularly. Instead of writing, the men make telephone calls using calling cards at pre-determined times to speak to their wives and learn about their children and other family members. The calls do not always bring good news, and the men, instead of being elated, are often frustrated or remorseful for not being at home looking after problems. Bad news frequently leads to drinking.

This isolation, as the case studies and focus group participants made clear, is hard on the men. Away from their families and communities for long periods, the men suffer from loneliness. With a vastly reduced structure in place to serve as a social support system similar to the ones back home, there is a propensity to binge drink. It allows them to cope, albeit in a pathological fashion, and to temporarily forget their dismal circumstances. Drinking, however, is not a solution and, at times, leads to other problems.

**3. Peer Pressure**—We expected to find rampant peer pressure to drink given the fraternal nature of the migrant living arrangements. Instead, we discovered from our informal interviews in the community ethnography and focus groups that peer pressure to drink is subtle, more along the lines of encouraging a housemate or friend to have a beer. Encouragement consisted of making alcohol available or verbally coaxing. Perhaps because there is always someone in the group who is willing to have a drink, hazing does not occur. About the only time that a housemate or friend is persistent in getting someone else to drink is when he finds himself drinking alone. Drinking alone goes against the recreational, or social, nature of drinking and indicates that the person has a drinking problem or is a problematic drinker—someone who drinks and becomes unruly or violent.

In general, known drinkers in the housing units are coaxed into drinking, while non-drinkers are not pressured. Everyone is invited to drink but not everyone is coaxed into drinking. Young men do not coax their older peers unless a joking relationship exists between them. Coaxing also does not occur between father and son or uncle and nephew, but is common between siblings and cousins. Coaxing takes place with and works best among friends, kin, crewmates, and compatriots from the same home community. It works best among good friends because a good friend never allows a friend to drink alone. He will at least have one beer. Drinking reinforces friendships and, culturally, turning down a drink is rude. Unless there is a good reason for not drinking, it calls into question the dyadic relationship between individuals.

### Social and Individual Factors

We also considered the background of the migrants, their migration experience, and current employment to see if they had a bearing on drinking. The background characteristics were age, formal educational level, and English language proficiency. The number of work tours in the region and other regions of the United States and the duration of each were used to assess their migration experience. Employment referred to whether or not the case study participants were gainfully employed. We also considered density of alcohol outlets—the total number of alcohol dispensing outlets in the research area, such as beer distributors, restaurants and other eateries, bars, and state liquor stores.

**1. Background Characteristics**—In regard to background characteristics, from our case study participants and focus groups, we found that young men, particularly in their 20s and 30s, make up the majority of the binge drinkers. Both married and single migrants binge drink, but older married men do not do so as frequently, unless they have a drinking problem, because they view regular binge drinking as a young man's activity. There was no correlation between formal educational level and drinking, given that all of the men have similar educational backgrounds. We thought that migrants with English language competence would not drink as much as those without because they would be less socially isolated. Among the case studies, however, we did not find anyone who was comfortable speaking English. Embarrassed by syntax errors, struggles for vocabulary, and heavy Spanish accents, they rarely make an effort to speak English.

**2. Migration History**—Migration history, we initially thought, would have a direct bearing on drinking. We expected to find that migrants who have been migrating for years, as opposed to first-timers, would be less likely to binge drink. The experienced migrant would suffer less from homesickness and cultural disorientation—feelings that contribute to drinking. Among our case study participants, two-thirds of them had migrated to Southern Chester County three or more times prior to the ethnographic present, whereas the remaining had made less than two trips. All of them had migrated to other states. However, among the case study participants, we found very little evidence that migration experience has a direct bearing one way or another on drinking. Experienced migrants as well as their less experienced counterparts participated in binge drinking. We suspect that kin and friends in the area keep the first-timers from lapsing into severe cultural disorientation and prolonged cultural shock by protecting them, informing them about local customs and practices, and showing them the ropes.

Related to migration history, we expected to find that undocumented or illegal migrants, given their clandestine and stressful existence, would drink more than their documented or legal counterparts. Surprisingly, however, we found through our case study participants and focus groups that both documented/legal and undocumented/illegal migrants binge drink, which led us to believe that other factors are responsible for binge drinking.

**3. Employment**—At the outset, we believed that unemployed men would suffer from despair or have more time on their hands to drink. However, in our community ethnography, we did not find any unemployed migrants in the mushroom industry. Additionally, as found in Table 4: Current Employment, all 15 of our case studies were gainfully employed and worked year round. The majority of the case study participants worked for their employers for years, up to 21 years in one case. Only three had worked for their current employers for under one year. The case study participants worked in companies with a work force that ranged from six to 250 workers. It turns out that many migrants unable to find gainful employment leave the mushroom industry and work in the service sector. Others return to Mexico or leave for another destination in the country, usually in surrounding states. In general, migrants cannot afford to be unemployed. They have to pay for room and board, and in Mexico, their families depend on their remittances. Some of the migrants also have to pay outstanding debts, especially money borrowed to make the trip to Southern Chester County.

**4. Density of Alcohol Outlets**—In regard to the density of alcohol outlets, we expected to find a greater amount of binge drinking in housing units near a concentration of businesses that sell alcohol beverages. The work of Gruenewald, Millar, and Roeper (1996), Mosher (1994), and Saffer (1996) uncovered a strong correlation between a high density of alcohol outlets and heavy drinking with high crime rates. However, we did not find a greater amount of alcohol consumption in the housing units in and around locales with a high density of alcohol outlets than in those located away from these businesses. We discovered that, irrespective of the number of businesses, the migrants did not frequent all of them. For example, out of the dozen businesses that sell alcohol in Kennett Square, the migrants living in the borough or nearby only patronize four—the two beer distributors, a bar, and occasionally the state liquor store. The migrants, along with their immigrant counterparts, do not feel comfortable entering the other alcohol selling establishments—pizza shops, restaurants, and bars—because they claim to stand out among the non-Mexican-origin patrons and feel out of place.



## Conclusions

We discovered that not all of the transnational migrants drink heavily—some are occasional or recreational drinkers, while others abstain altogether. In any given weekend, however, up to 80 percent of the men binge drink in the housing units of our 15 case study participants. Binge drinking, we also found, is not solely the consequence of situational and other identified factors, as originally thought, although these factors made them susceptible to this type of drinking. Instead, a number of other factors, among them festive occasions, bad news from home, and a long workweek in combination with each of the other factors, result in binge drinking. Much to our surprise, binge drinking does not always result in negative behavior, such as engaging in physical altercations and destroying property while in a drunken stupor. However, as we noted, this type of binge drinking places the men at a risk for negative behavior, mainly drinking and driving, which happens when the migrants go out and purchase more beer or visit friends at a nearby camp.

Binge drinking among the migrants, as we documented, is determined by and is a product of their migrant status as solo foreign workers in grower-provided housing, physically dislocated from family, community, and social support in Mexico. In the United States, away from home for months, if not years, they find themselves in a migrant culture, alien to their traditional way of life. With little transportation, they are also isolated from nearby communities, where they may have kin and may find distraction from their plight. This prolonged cultural dislocation from their familiar way of life in Mexico, aggravated by non-traditional living arrangements, social isolation, and stressful work schedules, leads some of the men—mainly men in their 20s and 30s who do not have families of their own to support—to binge drink.

Our findings, although preliminary, suggest the need for an innovative approach in finding solutions to the binge drinking of the transnational migrants and the problems that accompany it. This paradigm shift requires that we go beyond conceptualizing alcohol abuse in this workforce as an acculturation failure or as dysfunctional or pathological behavior brought about by a shortcoming in character. We also need to consider approaches and community action programs that see migrant drinking as caused by policy-making, such as immigration policy, outside of the immediate area but with local impact, and recognize that solutions need to come from broad-based community partnerships. Specifically, we need to consider the underlying causes behind the binge drinking of the migrants—that is, their migrant status which culturally dislocates them from family and community in their homeland and creates intractable and insurmountable difficulties for them. As we have demonstrated, while in the United States, they are socially and geographically severed from familiar social supports and placed in the midst of an unfamiliar and stressful environment that puts them at high risk for drinking heavily. If we make this paradigm shift, it becomes apparent that conventional prevention and intervention programs are not enough.

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## Biography

Victor Garcia is a professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Associate Director of Cultural and Ethnic Studies at the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Training Institute at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA. The first-person plural is used in this article. The use of this voice is more than a writing style. It is also adopted to acknowledge the teamwork behind the research project. Besides the author and the field researchers, Dr. Edward Gondolf, the Research Director at the field Mid-Atlantic Addiction Training Institute (MAATI), was instrumental in designing the grant applications for the study addressed in the article: “Problem Drinking among Migrant Mexican Farmworkers,” National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Grant # 1R03 AA12659-01. He also assisted in the data analysis.