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# “It’s like We’re Still in Slavery”: Stress as Distress and Discourse among Jamaican Farm Workers in Ontario, Canada

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**Abstract:** For more than fifty years, Jamaican farm workers have been seasonally employed in Canada under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). In Canada, these workers live and work in conditions that make them vulnerable to various health issues, including poor mental health. This ethnographic study investigated Jamaican SAWP workers’ mental health experiences in Southern Ontario. Several common factors that engender psychological distress among Jamaican workers, ranging from mild to extreme suffering, were uncovered and organised into five themes: (1) family, (2) work environments and SAWP relations, (3) living conditions and isolation, (4) racism and social exclusion, and (5) illness and injury. I found that Jamaican workers predominantly use the term ‘stress’ to articulate distress, and they associate experiences of suffering with historic plantation slavery. Analysis of workers’ stress discourses revealed their experiences of psychological distress are structured by the conditions of the SAWP and their social marginalisation in Ontario. This article presents and discusses these findings in the context of SAWP power dynamics and concludes with policy recommendations aimed at improving the mental health of all SAWP workers. In foregrounding the experiences of Jamaican workers, this study addresses the dearth of research on the health and wellbeing of Caribbean SAWP workers.

**Keywords:** mental health; migrant farm workers; idiom of distress; stress; anti-Black racism; migration; medical anthropology; Jamaica; Canada



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## 1. Introduction

First established in 1966 to fill labour shortages in the Canadian agriculture sector, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) is the primary agricultural stream of Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). Jamaica was the first country to send workers to Canada under the SAWP, and the first 264 Jamaican SAWP workers were employed in Southern Ontario. In the 1970s, the program was expanded to include Mexico and ten other Caribbean countries. The SAWP operates through bilateral agreements between the Canadian government and sending-state governments. Over the past five decades, the number of workers travelling to Canada under the SAWP has steadily increased and the program is now an entrenched feature of the Canadian agriculture sector. In 2021, more than 41,000 workers were employed in Canada under the SAWP.<sup>1</sup>

A contemporary articulation of indentured labour, the SAWP hires workers on closed work permits that tie them to a single Canadian employer who can fire and deport them without cause, notice, or process (Martinez 2022). Annual SAWP contracts can last up to a maximum of eight months, but all workers must return home by mid-December of the hiring year. For the duration of their time in Canada, SAWP workers must live in employer-provided housing, but there is no national housing standard, and the existing minimum standards are inadequate.<sup>2</sup> To be re-employed under the program, SAWP workers must be called back by a previous employer and/or receive positive employer evaluations. This structural vulnerability creates a culture of fear that makes SAWP workers reluctant to

refuse unsafe work, speak out for their rights, report abuse, or seek health care for fear of losing present and future employment (Depatie-Pelletier et al. 2022). The SAWP offers no pathway for permanent immigration to Canada, and many workers engage in an annual cycle of circular migration and intense physical labour for decades. Research shows that all SAWP workers in Canada are vulnerable to a variety of health issues related to occupational and environmental health, sexual and reproductive health, chronic and infectious diseases, as well as mental health (McLaughlin and Hennebry 2013; McLaughlin et al. 2014; Mysyk et al. 2008; Narushima et al. 2016; Salami et al. 2015). These risks are heightened in Ontario, where agricultural workers are exempt from several provincial employment standards protections and precluded from joining labour unions (Vosko et al. 2019).

To ensure a healthy and strong workforce, SAWP workers must pass a medical exam in their home country each year as a prerequisite of participation in the program. However, research reveals these workers face numerous, intersecting social determinants of health in Canada, including precarious employment, dangerous working conditions, substandard housing, low income/social status, lack of social support and connectedness, substandard living environments and housing, limited access to health care, health literacy challenges, and gender issues (Caxaj et al. 2023; Edmunds et al. 2011; Mayell and McLaughlin 2016; McLaughlin 2009, 2010; McLaughlin et al. 2018). Although SAWP workers are contractually entitled to provincial health care while working in Canada (e.g., Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP)), research shows that sick and injured workers encounter many barriers to accessing health care, including long hours of work and limited clinic hours; lack of transportation; dependence on employers and resulting confidentiality concerns; language and literacy barriers; delays in receiving health cards; and lack of information about and integration into local health care systems (Cole et al. 2019; Hennebry 2010; Hennebry et al. 2016; McLaughlin et al. 2018; Pysklywec et al. 2011). Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these health issues and access barriers for SAWP workers in Canada.

Research shows that SAWP workers in Canada were disproportionately harmed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Landry et al. 2021). Early in the pandemic, air travel restrictions and closed borders created concerns among Canadian farmers that they would not be able to hire the migrant labourers their operations depend on. In response, the Canadian government deemed SAWP workers “essential workers” so they could enter Canada, but the policies put in place to protect these workers during the pandemic were inadequate and failed to consider the social determinants of health faced by this population (Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG) 2021). In the first wave of the pandemic, migrant farm workers in Ontario were at least 10 times more likely to contract SARS-CoV-2 than the overall population (CBC 2020). Moreover, many pandemic responses in Canada stigmatized and dehumanized migrant workers, curtailed their rights, and jeopardized their health, revealing negligence, lack of co-ordination, and systemic racism on the part of Canadian government (Hennebry et al. 2020). In this context, nearly 45,000 SAWP workers were employed in Canada in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Factors that contributed to the rapid spread of COVID-19 on Canadian farms include crowded indoor workplaces, poorly ventilated housing, jobs that preclude physical distancing, limited sanitation and handwashing stations, and lack of personal protective equipment (Haley et al. 2020; Vosko and Spring 2021). A study in Ontario and Quebec found the pandemic increased employment strains among migrant workers by introducing new risks in both workplaces and employer-provided dwellings (Vosko et al. 2022). Another pandemic study examined the coroner files of nine migrant agricultural workers who died in Ontario between January 2020 and June 2021 and identified factors that exacerbated the risk of poor health outcomes and death, namely recruitment and travel risks; missed steps and substandard conditions of healthcare monitoring, quarantine, and isolation; barriers to accessing healthcare; and missing information and broader issues of concern (Caxaj et al. 2022). Predictably, the mental health of migrant farm workers in Canada considerably worsened during the pandemic (Basok and George 2020; Doyle 2020;

Evra and Mongrain 2020; Landry et al. 2021; Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC) 2020; Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) 2022), and although no study to date has explored the causes of this deterioration, it is likely linked to increases in the quantity and intensity of stressors faced by migrant workers during the pandemic.

Insights into farm workers' mental health can be gleaned from reviewing the relevant literature in the United States (US). Early studies into the mental health of migrant farm workers in the US were inter-disciplinary and often focused on acculturative stress and on identifying specific stressors associated with risk for depression and anxiety (Arcury and Quandt 2007; Grzywacz et al. 2010; Hiott et al. 2008; Hovey and Magaña 2002, 2003; Magaña and Hovey 2003). More recent studies exploring the stressors associated with depression among Latino migrant farm workers have been conducted in Arizona (Carvajal et al. 2014), California (Bauer and Kantayya 2010), Nebraska (Ramos et al. 2015), North Carolina (Crain et al. 2012), and Vermont (Baker et al. 2021); all produced comparable findings and highlight the need for healthy coping strategies. This body of literature is limited by its focus on Latinx workers and its failure to problematize the broader political economic context that structures farm workers' suffering and distress in the US.

The mental health of SAWP workers in Canada is less explored in research. A Southern Ontario study among Mexican workers identified a combination of fear, feeling trapped, and giving in to circumstances as particularly conducive to negative experiences of distress (England et al. 2007). Another Ontario study identified 'nerves' as the idiom Mexican workers use both to articulate distress and as a metaphor for lack of control over their bodies and the breakdown in self/society relations (Mysyk et al. 2008). A study exploring the health of SAWP workers from Mexico and the Caribbean identified numerous factors that negatively impact workers' emotional wellbeing, including social isolation, concern for family, unsafe work conditions, and poor housing (McLaughlin 2009). A British Columbia study found that SAWP workers' sense of dignity, value, and identity are often compromised by workplace dynamics, social isolation, loneliness, and a sense of unworthiness, prompting feelings of depression and anxiety (Caxaj and Diaz 2018). A recent study found that prolonged family separation under the SAWP negatively impacts the mental and emotional health of Mexican women and their family members (Escrig-Pinol et al. 2023). Notably, most of these studies place emphasis on the mental health of SAWP workers from Mexico, and none focus on workers from the Caribbean.

Few studies foreground the experiences of Caribbean SAWP workers in Canada (Beckford 2016; Leach 2013). This research lacuna reflects the workings of anti-Black racism and the marginalisation of Black communities in contemporary Canada. Research shows that Caribbean and Black communities in Canada represent some of the most vulnerable populations in terms of vulnerability to health risks, receipt of adequate care, and prospect of recovery (Etowa et al. 2021). One recent study among Jamaican SAWP workers in British Columbia found that anti-Black racism in Canada permeates, organises, and frustrates the lives and experiences of Jamaican workers on farms and in local communities (Hjalmarson 2022). This study also found that Jamaican workers characterise their time in Canada as 'prison life' and situates these experiences in the context of anti-Black immigration policy in Canada and the workings of racial capitalism in Canadian institutions (Hjalmarson 2022). Considering the history of plantation slavery in the Caribbean, the past trauma of slavery has an important influence on the distress of Caribbean people (Smith 2013, 2015a), yet hitherto, no major study has focussed on the mental health and wellbeing of Caribbean SAWP workers in Canada.

As the first country to sign a SAWP contract in 1966, Jamaican workers have been working on Canadian farms for more than fifty years. The past five decades in Jamaica have been characterised by increasing rates of unemployment and receding social services, such as education and health care. Extremely high levels of unemployment in Jamaica and the cost of their children's education are the two main factors that motivate Jamaican workers' participation in the SAWP today (Hjalmarson 2022; McLaughlin 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these longstanding issues; in 2020, Jamaica's poverty rate increased

to 23% from 19% in 2019. At the same time, the country's unemployment rate increased from 7.7% in 2019 to 9.5% in 2020 (World Bank 2022a, 2022b). Due to poverty and social inequality, Jamaica's pandemic recovery is among the slowest in the Caribbean region (Beglyakov 2023). In this context, the SAWP remained an appealing option for many Jamaicans despite increased pandemic-related risks.

In 2022, amid an entrenched global health crisis, approximately 9300 Jamaican farm workers travelled to Canada under the SAWP (Statistics Canada 2023). While in Canada, Jamaican SAWP workers are supported by the Jamaican Liaison Service (JLS). The JLS was established in 1966 by the Jamaican Ministry of Labour to administer the SAWP in Canada. Its role is to work closely with governmental and non-governmental organizations in Canada to facilitate the general welfare of all Jamaican SAWP workers (Jamaica Liaison Service (JLS) 2022). If a worker is injured or becomes sick in Canada, the JLS is mandated to facilitate the worker's access to health care and workers' compensation. Academics and critics highlight the conflict of interest inherent in the JLS, since they must appease employers to secure the continuation of Jamaican SAWP workers being selected. Research shows this dual positionality undermines their ability to serve as effective advocates for workers (Binford 2013).

This ethnographic study investigated the mental health experiences of Jamaican SAWP workers in three regions of Southern Ontario: Durham Region, Niagara Region, and Norfolk County. The objectives of this study were to understand the unique ways Jamaican workers experience and talk about psychological distress in relation to their employment under the SAWP and to elucidate what these experiences mean to the workers. Taking a medical anthropological approach, I focussed on uncovering the dominant 'idiom of distress'—the socially and culturally meaningful way of experiencing and expressing psychological distress in a particular setting—used by Jamaican workers in Ontario (Kirmayer and Young 1998; Nichter 1981, 2010). To this end, I administered 21 surveys, conducted multiple in-depth interviews with three (3) key informants, maintained electronic communication with dozens of workers, and spent approximately 300 h engaged in participant observation across all three regions. To uncover workers' causal explanations for distress, I took an 'explanatory models' approach (Kleinman and Benson 2006) during surveys, interviews, and discussions with workers.

## 2. Methodology and Methods

This study employed a 'participatory research' approach in its explicit commitment to conducting research that benefits participants, through both direct intervention and by using the results to inform action for transformative change (Israel et al. 1998; Israel et al. 2005). A primary goal of my methodology was to assist Jamaican SAWP workers in practical and meaningful ways throughout the duration of my fieldwork by connecting them with health care services, local churches, social supports, and recreational events. I also sought to produce evidence-based research that can inform efforts directed toward transformative change at the levels of society and policy.

### 2.1. Participants

During the 2015 agricultural season, between June and November, I conducted ethnographic research in three regions of Southern Ontario that host large numbers of Caribbean SAWP workers: Durham Region, Niagara Region, and Norfolk County. I gathered most data in and around the town of Simcoe in Norfolk County; between June and October, I travelled to Simcoe every Friday afternoon, as well as every Thursday afternoon during July and August, in concordance with local workers' time off. In Durham Region, I helped plan and execute several events for local SAWP workers and attended monthly Caribbean church services for workers. In Niagara Region, I assisted in the delivery of a mental health workshop for migrant workers and volunteered at events organized by the local migrant worker support group.

## 2.2. Procedure

To recruit participants, I conducted direct outreach in Norfolk County and Durham Region around the retail areas frequented by migrant farm workers. I approached Caribbean workers and explained that I was doing health research with Jamaican workers about stress and wellness. During these interactions, I gave workers my telephone number and a region-specific pamphlet I created containing information about the local health services and social supports available to them. These pamphlets were written in accessible plain language. Many workers I approached during outreach engaged with me in unstructured interviews on the spot regarding their stresses, concerns, and most were eager for me to record and share their stories.

## 2.3. Data Collection

Over the course of my fieldwork, I spent approximately 300 h engaged in participant observation (and recorded detailed fieldnotes) at several events in all three regions, including health fairs, recreation events, and health promotion workshops. Moreover, I frequently drove workers to medical clinics, diagnostic labs, medical specialists, grocery stores, recreational events, and other social services. I also regularly visited farms, bunkhouses, and crops fields in all three regions; I visited more than a dozen bunkhouses in Norfolk County, three in Niagara, and six in Durham Region. In this way, I witnessed a variety of working and living conditions, which informs my analyses.

Across all three regions, I administered surveys to 21 Jamaican SAWP workers. Survey questions were written in accessible and culturally appropriate language. In recognition of workers' limited time off and competing priorities, the survey was kept brief (14 questions). I administered the surveys in quiet and private areas, and in recognition of potential literacy issues, I recorded the workers responses. Surveys included a mix of multiple choice and open-answer questions designed to elicit demographic data, explanatory models for distress, coping strategies, and recommendations for social support.

I conducted a total of eight (8) in-depth interviews with three (3) key informants. Interviews were semi-structured, as the conversation often expanded from the guiding questions, and generally lasted about an hour in length. I interviewed two (2) workers on multiple occasions, and I interviewed the third worker only once. Interview questions were designed to uncover workers' experiences of stress, causal attributions for distress, as well as the meaning of stress for workers.

During surveys and interviews, I took an explanatory models approach (Kleinman and Benson 2006) to uncover the culturally specific ways Jamaican workers think about, understand, and express psychological distress. The concept of 'explanatory models' was first formulated by Kleinman et al. (1978) to describe the culturally determined process of making sense of one's suffering, ascribing meanings to symptoms, and evolving causal attributions. In this way, explanatory models are culturally determined beliefs people hold about suffering, misfortune, health, and illness (Dinos et al. 2017). Taking an explanatory models approach allowed me to uncover the explanation for, as well as the meaning of, stress for Jamaican workers.

Throughout my fieldwork, I maintained electronic communication via text, phone, and WhatsApp with approximately 40 workers (including key informants and some survey respondents). Most of these interactions involved providing workers with accessible information about social services, local churches, and retail options. I also assisted workers experiencing abuse by their employers understand and navigate their options. I sought explicit permission to use all data I collected during these informal exchanges, whether acquired in person or over the phone. All participants were men, ranging in age from early 20s to late 50s.

## 2.4. Analysis

Although many researchers across disciplines discuss stress as a concrete reality, in fact, it is an explanatory principle (Korovkin and Stephenson 2010). This study approached

'stress' as a narrative idiom used to describe a process that is experienced as psychologically and emotionally unpleasant and negative. In medical anthropology, idiom of distress is a concept to describe socially and culturally meaningful ways of experiencing and expressing psychological distress and/or affliction in local worlds (Kirmayer and Young 1998; Nichter 1981, 2010). Idioms of distress communicate experiential states that range from mildly stressful to extreme suffering that render people or groups incapable of functioning (Nichter 2010). Importantly, idioms of distress are underscored by affective and symbolic associations that acquire contextual meaning in relation to particular stressors (Nichter 1981). This research conceptualised 'stress' as an idiom of distress to investigate the social, interpersonal, political, and economic sources of distress among Jamaican SAWP workers, as well as the cultural dimensions and meanings of these experiences.

After data collection activities were complete, I compiled the ethnographic data collected through formal interviews, fieldnotes, informal interactions with workers, and surveys. I took an inductive approach to analysing workers' narratives about stress and identified common themes in how Jamaican workers talked to me about stress in Ontario (Bernard 2011). Next, I conducted a Foucauldian approach to analysing workers' stress discourses. Stress was first conceptualised as a discourse in anthropology by Young (1980), who demonstrates the meanings associated with stress derive from social, cultural, and historical contexts. As constructed by Foucault (1978), a 'discourse' is a system of representation that provides a means to talk about and represent knowledge in a particular historical moment (Hall 2001). From a Foucauldian perspective, discourses are not mere instances of language use; rather, they are the rules, divisions, and systems of a particular body of knowledge, and they always operate in relation to power (McHoul and Grace 1993). In this way, discourse is "the production of knowledge through language" and both meaning and meaningful practice are constructed through discourse (Hall 2001, pp. 72–73). This research approached stress as a discourse (Adelson 2008; Young 1980) to contextualise workers' experiences and interpretations of stress as part of a system of power and international inequality.

### 3. Results

In the early days of my fieldwork, I learned the concept of 'mental health' was highly stigmatised among Jamaican SAWP workers, who associated it with 'madness' and 'craziness'. Instead, when Jamaican workers told me about their experiences of suffering, they used the language of 'stress' to communicate their distress. Accordingly, I revised my research questions to investigate explanatory models for distress among Jamaican workers and to uncover the factors associated with workers' distress in Ontario.

I found the structural and quotidian conditions under which Jamaican SAWP workers live and work in Ontario give rise to experiences of psychological distress that range from mild to extreme suffering. I identified several common factors that engender distress and organised them into five themes. To follow, I present these findings with reference to ethnographic data. All names are pseudonyms.

#### 3.1. Family

Most workers reported a desire to provide their families with a better life back home as the main reason they choose to work in Canada under the SAWP, so it is unsurprising that the stress associated with homesickness, missing family, and transnational parenting were predominant in my findings.

Education in Jamaica beyond primary school (grade 6) is not covered by the state, and many workers told me the income they earn working in Canada means they can afford the tuition to put their children through school. Clifton, father of nine children, explained:

School in Jamaica is expensive, the parents have to buy everything like paper and books and everything. I come here so I can pay for my kids' tuition, and I make sure that I send the money home on time. My kids work hard at school, they want a future.

One active way I saw Jamaican workers parent from a distance was sourcing books, electronics, and school supplies to ship home to their children. However, this often proved stressful if they were not able to locate or understand what their child was looking for.

Many workers expressed how difficult it is to be separated from their family for such a long period of time, especially their children. A young survey respondent working under the SAWP for the first time emotionally explained:

I miss my family. I worry about the family back home, especially my son, because he is young, and I want him to know his father and give him things I never had.

He went on to say his time in Canada would be improved “if the boss would realize we are people, that we have families”.

To keep in touch with their families, most workers called home daily, but some expressed that electronic communication is not enough, and it is expensive. Delroy explained:

While we are here, we are away from our wives and girlfriends, so the men have to handle big phone bills. And being lonely with no wife, no sex, is very stressful. It would be nice to see my wife, the farmer should allow our spouses to visit.

During phone calls back home, marital conflict can worsen the stress of homesickness. Trevor emphasised the importance of a supportive partner:

Working in Canada, you have to have a strong family back home. If you have a girlfriend or a wife, they have to be supportive of what you are doing. You have to get support from your family. You have to be able to maintain your family from here, you have to make your family back home feel happy, so they give you the support. If they're not happy, it don't make no sense to come here cause if you have a family back home giving you trouble, while you're in Canada dealing with the stress from the boss, it's too much pressure.

Some workers worried about whether their partner will remain loyal to them while they are in Canada. Andrew explained:

The real reason why we come to Canada is to work [so] that we can maintain our family, but how can we maintain our family under certain pressures that we face? You are married, and you are here from eight months, and within that eight months you don't know what can happen in Jamaica while you're in Canada working so hard.

Distance from family and community was particularly difficult for workers when a loved one passed away back home. I found grief exacerbates feelings of homesickness and could provoke extreme sadness. Calvin told me:

Things are not good. I lost my uncle back home on Wednesday. . . it's hard. . . things are getting worse by the day here. I am dying to get home and see my kids.

Similarly, at a mental health workshop in Niagara Region, some Jamaican workers in attendance brought musical instruments and sang 'nine night' songs, traditional Jamaican funerary songs that are known across the island. Other Jamaican workers joined in and collectively the group sang with pensive emotion. I asked Jacob what this meant to him, and he told me:

My sister died three years back when I was up here working in Canada. It was hard, I never got to be with my family at that time. Today, I sang and remembered her.

### 3.2. Work Environments and SAWP Relations

Agriculture is among the most dangerous industries in Canada. Most workers were aware of the importance of personal protective equipment (PPE), so the fact employers did not provide adequate protection was a source of stress for many workers. It was common for workers to use handkerchiefs and bandanas as masks when handling pesticides, and many suffered skin rashes and eye irritation as a result. Many workers I spoke with told me they worry about the association between pesticides and cancer, and they perceived the

fact that farm owners do not provide adequate PPE as evidence that they are viewed as “disposable workers”.

Young workers, especially those in their first year, were surprised and unprepared for the harsh work conditions in Canada and most expressed disbelief at the realities of working under the SAWP. One worker in his early twenties from Montego Bay explained:

Farm work it's not good, the farm owner is no good, he's not polite and he treats workers like slavery. We are supposed to work all day, with no breaks. It's not right, we Jamaicans are not used to this.

During my fieldwork, the weather conditions across Southern Ontario were unfavourable to crops in some areas, yet certain crops thrived in Norfolk County that season, namely strawberries and raspberries. For workers on berry farms, this meant particularly strenuous and long days crouched over and picking. Trevor described his average workday:

You get up at 5 a.m., and you work right through the day. You only get fifteen minutes break in the morning, half hour for lunchtime, and fifteen minutes break in the evening. Within that time you have to always be bending your back and working, right through the day. So, it's very hard for you to be comfortable in the environment, because we in Jamaica think that everything is gold in Canada, you come here and you say 'oh, everybody loves Canada because Canada is so quiet and Canada is so nice'. But, yet still it's like we're still in slavery, cause you come here and the boss gonna tell you that you can't get up for two seconds, just to stand up and look around. You can't do that. . . you know?

When the later season crops were ready for harvesting, Trevor explained workers were expected to put in twelve-hour days:

While the field boss coming by saying *faster, faster*, and the boss wanted us to be picking so early in the morning when it was dark, and we told him we can't see in the dark, but it didn't matter. . .start at 7!

For Trevor, the intensity of work demands was exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness over his own body and concern for his health:

Then you know what they do? The supervisors are Black, and they use them to put the pressure on the we [Jamaican workers]. We have sometimes guys feel pain right through, and they have a pain in their back for months and can't do anything about it because they don't want to go to the boss' wife and tell her 'I'm feeling a pain', she'll like take a guy to the hospital, and tomorrow morning she sends for that guy to come and do work in the field.

Many workers reported issues with unscrupulous employers issuing inaccurate and/or untimely paycheques, and many workers did not understand the government and SAWP deductions on their pay stubs. Garfield, a worker in his forties, told me he approached his boss to ask why he was being paid ten hours in cash each pay period and to request all his work hours be paid on his cheque; he was fired on the spot. In disbelief, Garfield called the liaison officer, who confirmed that his employer's payroll practices did violate the conditions of the program. However, the liaison officer also said there was nothing that could be done, Garfield must go home to Jamaica. I asked his thoughts about the Jamaican liaison services, Garfield explained:

The liaisons don't care about their own kind, and they don't protect anybody but the bosses. I think it should be white people caring over Blacks, because the white people in Canada have power to really force things [to get better]. The liaison should protect my rights, but instead I have to come to you. The liaison makes it no good, it makes things much worse for me because he says he can't help, I have to go back home. My wife is upset, she doesn't understand. The liaison said he knows this is an injustice, but he can't do anything. I hope I can come back next year, but not to this farm.

In the days following his termination, I helped Garfield complete errands before going home. A farmer back home in Jamaica, Garfield explained he chose to work in Canada because his crops have been failing in recent years. He told me that he grew up without a father and never wanted to leave his two children, but he felt the SAWP was the only way to make enough money to pay back loans and save his farm. Garfield felt deeply ashamed for returning home mid-way through his contract and worried his children would be disappointed and his wife would be angry.

### *3.3. Living Conditions and Isolation*

Stories about poor living conditions and inadequate housing were common. Although there was variation among the bunkhouses I visited, most were poorly constructed, poorly maintained, overcrowded, and lacked adequate amenities. For example, I kept in contact with approximately a dozen Jamaican workers at a mixed vegetable farm in Norfolk County, and I learned the workers slept in the loft area of a converted barn with no insulation, no heating, and no toilets inside the building; the toilets were outside and down a path, and workers expressed indignation at being asked to walk through the dark at night to use the washroom. Moreover, at this farm the workers were made to shower in one open room with nine showerheads and no shower curtains or dividers for privacy; this was unacceptable to workers who expressed outrage. When I asked Patrick what he thought about his housing in Ontario, he quipped:

You don't think that Jamaican people have homes? Do you think we live in shacks? We have quality houses back home, so when I look at the bunkhouse, and how offshore workers live here, I wonder, how is it Canada is a First World country when things are so backward?

Poorly conditioned or inadequate number of appliances was a cause of conflict between housemates at several farms. Workers typically shared a limited number of cooking and washing appliances and had limited time off in which to get these chores accomplished, resulting in stress and competition. Trevor told me about the conditions at his bunkhouse:

There's like one machine has to serve twelve guys. Even the bathroom system, you have a heating system that whenever you turn on the machine the water in the bathroom get hot until there's steam coming out from the water. If you flush a bathroom, the water gets burning up. We bring it up to the boss and tell him, guys are getting burned, but there's nothing they do about it. Every year we come back and it's the same. And right now, the heating in the house is not working, and we cannot adjust the heat because the farm owner installed it [the thermostat] and took the remote and the key to his office. That alone brings stress on you.

The generally insufficient number of stoves in the bunkhouses meant that workers had to wait and take turns to prepare their meals, and many workers did not eat until late in the evening or sometimes not at all if they worked a particularly long day. I found Jamaican workers did not often share cooking duties with their housemates and instead preferred to take turns using the stove. This created competition and tension between workers. When I asked if workers ever share cooking responsibilities, I was often told they do not know their housemates well enough to share cooking, and many suspected that others would eat more than their share or put less effort into preparing the meal. Food is expensive in Ontario, and I found food insecurity is a major problem among Jamaican workers; I often heard of workers living on rice, water crackers, fruit flavoured drinks, and nutritional drinks (such as Ensure).

In some expansive rural areas of Southern Ontario, workers do not ride bicycles, and without transportation they spend their time off in the bunkhouse. This isolation was a source of stress for many workers, as a young survey respondent told me:

Simcoe is too isolated, [which is] more than stressful for a Kingston guy who is used to things. There is nothing here.

During one of our weekly meetings, I asked Trevor if he feels socially isolated at the bunkhouse, and he told me:

In Jamaica, we're not used to living in a cage like we're an animal or something, we are used to freedom.

Close living quarters and lack of privacy caused stress and tension among workers. Conflict among housemates occurred for various reasons, and rivalry between groups could be a great source of stress. Delroy explained:

It is stressful [living] on the farm because you have like one hundred and ten guys live on the main farm, how can you survive? Or, how can you be happy? No privacy. You're used to having your wife at home, or your girlfriend at home, you can sit down and talk and feel comfortable, with kids running up and down, you feel nice about it. But when you're living in a bunkhouse with a hundred and twenty guys, all of those guys come from different parishes, and they are not the same. So, you must feel stressed, and then by [the time] you lie down to sleep, it's morning again and you have to get up and work.

One farm that employed nearly one hundred Caribbean workers experienced frequent conflicts between Jamaican workers and their co-workers and supervisors from Barbados that went on throughout the season. Often, the situation was exacerbated by excessive alcohol consumption. At another farm in the same area, conflicts between senior Jamaican workers and young men from Kingston were recurring, as Clifton told me:

Those guys [Kingston youth] come here for the wrong reason, they come for *bling* and girlfriends, they don't have a good plan. They aren't used to hard work, so they complain and cause fights. Last year the Kingston guys stole items from the bunkhouse and now the boss knows you can't trust those guys.

These inter-Caribbean and inter-Jamaican dynamics were often exploited by employers in ways that ignited competition and prevented solidarity between workers.

### 3.4. Racism and Social Exclusion

Social exclusion and racism in rural Ontario communities were major sources of stress for Jamaican workers. Most workers expressed that their poor treatment in Canada was directly connected to their Blackness. Many workers I met in all regions lamented the rude treatment they receive in the community, particularly from the retailers and cashiers they interact with. At various locations in all regions, I witnessed locals glaring at workers, and cashiers being extremely rude and condescending during retail transactions. One survey respondent who spoke with me after completing his weekly grocery shopping in Norfolk County explained:

We know you have racists here in Canada, and that people don't like Black people. When we go into downtown, it's obvious. The cashiers at the grocery store won't even look up at you, but if it is a white person they say hello, and they smile. I've seen it many times.

I concluded surveys by asking workers what changes in the community or local services would improve their time working in Canada, and one of the most common requests by Jamaican workers was to address the racism and lack of friendliness in the community.

As English-speakers, Jamaican workers were generally left to navigate Canadian society and source things like social support and health care unassisted. Yet significant differences in socio-cultural norms and behaviours makes such endeavours difficult and stressful. Stress for Jamaican workers could be triggered by something as simple as needing a haircut, because although Norfolk Region hosted nearly 4500 workers in 2015, there were few local barbershops catering to the needs of Black clientele. For example, Randall asked me if I knew anyone who could plait (cornrow) his hair and I explained that I did not, but that I would ask the other guys where they go. Exasperated, Randall hung his head in his hands and said:

I don't like this place, there's nothing in this town. Why don't they give us guys what we need? I miss things back home.

Notably, Randall worked on a farm where the living and working conditions were the worst I personally ever witnessed, and there was also a great deal of competition among the workers in his bunkhouse. As a result, Randall regularly told me he was having a tough time coping.

Lack of accessible social and educational services for workers in the rural Ontario towns that host them means workers have few mechanisms by which they can connect and integrate into these communities. In the absence of accessible social support services, many of the workers I encountered during outreach asked me questions about their rights in Canada. The most frequent question I was asked concerned Employment Insurance (EI); namely, why farm workers pay into it, and whether they receive any benefits for doing so. Most workers expressed they had no one else to ask, and that the liaison did not tell them anything. When I asked workers where they might have gone for answers had they not met me, they typically could not respond.

Stress associated with the differences between Jamaican and Canadian societies is particularly salient in the case of Jamaican SAWP workers. Jamaican workers frequently expressed how difficult it is to adjust to the individualism that defines Canadian societies because it is so different than back home. While we chatted in the parking lot, Trevor explained:

It's different here. In Jamaica, if people don't notice you in the community for a day or two, someone is gonna come looking for you to make sure you are ok. Everybody watches out for each other.

The lack of friendship with Canadians was a tremendous source of stress and sadness for workers, and they regularly expressed sincere gratitude to me for my friendship and support.

### 3.5. *Illness and Injury*

Many Jamaican workers expressed concern that the stress they experience in Ontario might damage their physical health, specifically that they may develop elevated blood pressure that could negatively impact both their heart health and future employment prospects. For this reason, many workers regularly visited local pharmacies throughout the season to check their blood pressure on the machine, and at the migrant worker clinics and health fairs, blood pressure checks were one of the most common requests. I asked Trevor about how stress can affect his body, and he told me:

The stress of work brings up your blood pressure and that can kill you. If you are in the field, you have pressure from the work and pressure from just bending your back, you got the pressure from the boss, and the heat from the sun alone. All this pressure [will] make your blood pressure go up, this can kill you.

Trevor went on to say that drinking coconut water replenishes the body and brings the pressure back down. In this way, there is a dual meaning of "pressure" among Jamaican workers, social pressure as well as biological pressure within the arteries. In my experience, Jamaican workers who experienced prolonged psychological stress embodied several symptoms (i.e., fatigue, difficulty sleeping, trembling, anger, fear, desperation, and lack of concentration) that they understood to be a manifestation of nerves/nervousness brought on by stress.

I first met Clayton in June while conducting outreach in Norfolk County, and a few months afterward he contacted me when he suffered injuries resulting from faulty farm equipment. Although Clayton did inform his employer of the broken machinery before his injury, he was ordered back to work. Later that day, a 2500 lb. metal bin containing wet tobacco leaves fell on him. Unconscious, Clayton was taken by his employer to the local hospital. When he awoke, confused and with an intravenous in his arm, Clayton was greeted by the emergency room doctor who assured him that he "would be ok", and then,

despite his pain and injuries, he was sent back to the farm with his employer. The next morning, Clayton found blood clots in his urine and called me in distress.

I'm in a bad luck mood, not wanting to think too much about the accident, but I'm shaken up because there was like blood springing up in my mouth in the morning, and it's traumatizing to have blood in my urine. I've never taken a lick so hard in my life that I have peed blood clots. That accident mashed up my body, how can the doctor say I am going to be ok? I know this is a lifelong injury, I can feel it.

Despite the severity of his injuries, the workers' compensation board in Ontario (WSIB) granted Clayton only three days off with pay to recover. One of the most frustrating issues for Clayton was that his WSIB case manager communicated with the Jamaican liaison on his behalf, and not directly with Clayton himself. When Clayton had inquiries about the status of his workers' compensation claim, the liaison diminished his concerns and kept telling him to "co-operate".

As the weeks progressed with little physical improvement, Clayton was unable to do modified work duties. The persistence of his injury infuriated his employer, who accused Clayton of "pretending" and repeatedly told him: "You're not injured, you're ok, you just need to move that arm". This verbal harassment was compounded when the same individual used her phone to video record Clayton as he moved around the farm. This ongoing harassment seriously impacted Clayton's mental health. Four weeks after the accident, he told me:

I'm here now, depressed and distressed. . . one side of my body is not working right since I got the lick. I worked tirelessly around the clock, why can't the farmer take responsibility? I don't understand. The boss keeps telling me that I'm not injured. . . what am I, a piece of wood? A two-thousand-pound bin crushed my body, iron on iron, how am I ok? I am rejection over here.

Over the next few months, I accompanied Clayton to the migrant worker health clinic each week and helped arrange for him to see medical specialists in other areas of the province for more comprehensive testing. During one of our many trips to the clinic, Clayton told me:

Sometimes I feel mad at white people, because they have been violating my rights, and they don't care that I am injured because they say 'he's just a Black guy, he can go home and die.

During this time, Clayton's mental health further deteriorated as he struggled with physical pain, a hostile living environment, and financial difficulties made worse by his inability to access adequate workers' compensation. Physicians at the clinic remarked on Clayton's poor mental health and suggested he receive psychological counselling to help him manage the trauma and depression that resulted from the injury. Because Clayton had no transportation and was unfamiliar with the area, this was not possible. Despite his persistent injuries, Clayton returned home to Jamaica without having resolved his issues with workers' compensation.

Five months after returning home, Clayton was still unable to fully use his left side and suffered from headaches, back and shoulder pain, memory loss, and insomnia, and in his words "I'm depressed, like really, really stressed". Since returning to Jamaica, the ongoing physical pain, combined with the added burden of financial stress and the inability to provide for his four young children, has made Clayton's mental health even more precarious. During a phone conversation, he told me:

Since I've been home with no money, I have to borrow it from family. My girlfriend is stressed out, nothing is ok, she is worried about everything because my kids go to bed without enough food. When my kids ask "Daddy, why did you come home?" I tell them that farmer is a wicked person. I'm stressed out, can't sleep because I'm worrying about my kids while the WSIB people are sitting back in chairs saying "ok, that's just another Black guy, he can go away and die". If I die, it will be WSIB's fault.

Clayton continues to access health care in Kingston, Jamaica through the health care channels that are approved by the Jamaican Ministry of Labour. The doctor in Jamaica referred Clayton to a psychiatrist to help him deal with the stress and memory loss.

Despite the stigma around mental health among Jamaican workers, I found that workers who are injured in Canada report extreme psychological distress, including depressed moods, symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), and suicidal thoughts. Trevor reinforced my experience:

Some injured guys go crazy, because most of those guys go back and they don't have much things to live off. When they leave this job because they injured, they don't have another job, and ain't nobody gonna employ somebody that's injured. They gonna stay home, not doing anything, and that's stress. That would make you go crazy. You know, your mind can only take certain things. After a while it's like. . . you know, there are some people we call 'clean clothes mad people', they're clean but when you sit down and they talk to them, it's like you wonder, whoa, that person is gone. Sometimes you see them on the bus talking to themselves, and then they get up and do something crazy, and then you ask them [and] they tell you they used to work in Canada or America doing this job.

In a phone call from Jamaica in 2016, Clayton told me:

I left Jamaica as a worker, but I came home as a patient. Injured workers are those guys who suffer a lot. Now I can't feed my children, and nobody cares. What kind of a system is this? This is a slavery system that breaks bodies.

In sum, Jamaican SAWP workers' narratives revealed that numerous factors in Ontario engender psychological distress—namely homesickness, missing family, challenges of transnational parenting, financial concerns, grief and loss, wage theft, abusive employers, fear of deportation, unsafe work environments, racism (from employers, supervisors, and in local communities), Jamaican liaison officers, poor housing conditions, conflicts (with roommates, supervisors, employers), insufficient amenities, lack of privacy, lack of services in rural communities, illness, and injury. I found that Jamaican workers predominantly used the term 'stress' to articulate distress, and their experiences and narratives of suffering in Ontario were informed by their Blackness and the history of slavery in the Caribbean. In fact, the explicit analogies Jamaican workers drew between historic plantation slavery and the exploitative and racist conditions they encountered in Ontario demonstrate that Caribbean workers experience their employment under the SAWP in uniquely distressing ways. In my experience, Jamaican workers talked about their experiences of stress and suffering with full awareness that these experiences were structured by the conditions of the SAWP, and they were powerless to do anything about these conditions.

#### 4. Discussion

Approaching stress as an idiom of distress elucidates the social, political, economic, and interpersonal sources of distress, but it does not situate these sources within the broader structural context from which they emerge. Simultaneously approaching stress as discourse offers the possibility to contextualise the sources of distress and uncover the power relations and structures that maintain them. This discussion explores Jamaican SAWP workers' experiences of stress as distress and as a discourse.

To Foucault, a discourse is the production of knowledge through language, "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic" (Hall 1992, p. 72). As constructed by Foucault, the concept of discourse is not about whether things exist but about where meaning comes from (Hall 2001). In the case of Jamaican workers, stress language is commonly used, likely due to Jamaica's British-style education and health systems, and the spread of Western media. Foucault emphasises that discourses always function in relation to power structures (McHoul and Grace 1993, p. 39). In talking to the workers about their experiences of stress, as a white Canadian researcher, in many ways I too was reproducing power relations along

racial lines. When conducting surveys at the beginning of my fieldwork, workers often asked me to “write that down” when describing extreme suffering. I got the impression that workers saw my white-ness as power, and that by recording their specific challenges I might affect some positive change over the source of their stress. At the onset of fieldwork, I primarily administered surveys because I had not yet formed relationships with workers; during this time, none of the workers surveyed used the word ‘slavery’ when talking to me. After approximately a month of fieldwork, after I established the trust of enough workers, conversations about stress transformed into analogies of historic and modern slavery under the SAWP, and many workers expressed disbelief that Canada “allows” slavery. Reflecting my perceived power as a white Canadian, Clayton implored me to “talk to the new Prime Minister of Canada, explain the problems with the system, that guys are suffering. . . I think he will listen to you”.

In their analyses of social stress, [Korovkin and Stephenson \(2010\)](#) posit that stress is a systemic feature of any form of social organization, and they highlight that stress stems from dissonance that results from contradictions between systems of organization and the perceptions of the individuals within these systems. This is particularly true in the case of Jamaican workers in Ontario. Paradoxically, although workers exercise agency in choosing to participate in the SAWP and are grateful for the elevated socio-economic status it affords them in Jamaica, upon arriving in Canada, their agency is severely restricted by the condition of the program. The nationalist pride that serves as the foundation of their identities as ‘Jamaicans’, which is bolstered by political independence ([Mayell 2016](#)), is undermined in Ontario by the JLS and compounded by the racism they experience in Ontario communities. Furthermore, workers connect inadequate support from the JLS and its officers with the practice of being “sold out by our own people” during historic slavery.

Agriculture is among the most hazardous industries, insofar as farms production is often spread across a wide geographic area under changing or dangerous weather, light, and other environmental conditions. Risk is intensified if machinery is poorly designed, inadequately maintained, or improperly operated ([McCurdy and Carroll 2000](#)). Jamaican workers recognize these dangers, but the conditions of the SAWP are such that they are regularly asked to work in unsafe conditions, operate poorly maintained machinery, and work without proper personal protective equipment, and because their employer can repatriate them for any reason, workers have limited ability to refuse unsafe work ([McLaughlin et al. 2014](#)). Workers are aware that they are unprotected, at risk, and powerless, which clearly causes stress. This scenario played out to its worst possible end with Clayton, who is now facing a life-long injury because he was expected to operate heavy machinery that he knew was not functioning properly.

Stress associated with family and transnational parenting was prevalent, and many workers lamented their prolonged absence away from family. Workers situate these challenges within the control of the farm owners, and many workers appealed for some form of education for farm owners to let them know that Jamaicans are “humans” and “have families”. This supports recent research with Mexican women and their non-migrating family members found that participation in the SAWP has negative impacts on family dynamics and the emotional well-being of these families and posits that migration should be understood as a family process ([Escrig-Pinol et al. 2023](#)). Some Jamaican workers told me they wish farm workers could return home when a loved one passes away and return after mourning. Another issue was the cost of regularly calling home, which most workers relied on as a dominant coping strategy.

According to the conditions of the program, SAWP employers must provide living accommodations for workers, and although there are some minimal regulations around health and safety, there are no national standards for employer-provided housing in Canada. I found that SAWP workers’ accommodations in Ontario gave rise to stress associated with social isolation, substandard housing, inadequate amenities, lack of privacy, and conflict with housemates. Research shows that employer-provided bunkhouses do not only pose specific health and safety risks related to over-crowding, poor sanitation, and proximity

to pesticides (Preibisch and Hennebry 2011); they also contribute to the immobilization of SAWP workers (Smith 2015b) and impede workers' ability to establish a dignified and autonomous life in Canada (Perry 2018). Because workers have been coming to Southern Ontario for fifty years now, many of the bunkhouses I visited were run down and lacking basic amenities, and they are often over-crowded with workers.

Spending time-off in employer-provided housing elicited feelings of stress, boredom, and loneliness among workers. One survey respondent suggested that his time in Ontario would be improved if their spouses/girlfriends were able to visit workers mid-season and pointed out that prison inmates often receive conjugal visits from their spouses, and in this way, he suggested that his value in Canada as a migrant worker is "less than a criminal". A recent BC study similarly found Jamaican SAWP workers characterise their time in Canada as "prison life", in large part because they are confined to farms and employer-provided housing and forbidden from receiving visitors (Hjalmarson 2022). Research suggests the employer practice of restricting SAWP workers' movement and confining them on farms in employer-provided housing serves political economic power and benefits Canadian employers, food consumers, and the states that manage the program (Reid-Musson 2017).

Some workers told me their employers forbade them from going into town or engaging with locals, while others said they were not able to have visitors of any kind at the farm/bunkhouse. This echoes findings by research with Jamaican SAWP workers in BC, which argues that anti-Black racism constitutes the SAWP, in so far as the program is predicated upon deeply engrained and degrading beliefs that devalue Black lives and labour (Hjalmarson 2022). Similarly, many Jamaican workers I spoke to view the program itself as racist, citing their working and living conditions in Canada as a perpetuation of slavery. Workers' lack of visibility, labour rights, and social support in Canada reinforces this perspective (Smith 2013, 2015a). In my experience, such restrictions over workers' movements were interpreted by Jamaican workers through the lens of slavery, prompting 'slave owner' or 'slave master' labels for such employers.

Most workers reported experiencing racism in Ontario communities. Research shows anti-Black stereotypes in rural Ontario communities that construct Caribbean workers as naturally conflict-prone and sexually promiscuous are interwoven with a denial of "full humanity" in an "animalistic sense", whereby Black workers from the Caribbean are viewed as not having risen above their "animal origins" (Esses 2021, p. 511). This phenomenon was particularly evident in Simcoe, where workers report feeling unsafe due to animosity from local men who accuse them of "preying on" local women. Such racist perceptions of Black people in Canada were essential to the original design of the SAWP, namely that non-European workers could only be admitted to Canada as temporary workers under strict employment and mobility constraints; this framing remains embedded in the administrative structures of the SAWP to this day (Satzewich 1991; Perry 2012; Bauder 2008).

The cultural differences and pervasive racism Jamaican SAWP workers encounter in rural Ontario communities were major sources of distress. Examining the relationship between the act of migration and mental distress, Bhugra (2004) found that individuals coming from socio-centric (collective) societies who migrate to ego-centric (individualistic) societies are at risk for greater alienation and stress. Specifically, their stress results from incongruent ontologies: individualistic societies emphasise 'I' consciousness, autonomy, individual initiative, the right to privacy, emotional independence, financial security pleasure seeking, the need for specific friendship, and universalism; in contrast, collective societies emphasise 'we' consciousness, collective identity, group solidarity, group decisions, emotional inter-dependence, sharing, duties and obligations, the need for stable and predetermined friendships, and particularism" (Bhugra 2004). In my experience, I witnessed this I/we contrast among Jamaican workers, and many workers referred to themselves in conversation using first-person 'we'.

Illness was another cause of stress for workers, as they worry employers will send them home them if they become sick—a practice called "medical repatriation" (Orkin et al. 2014).

In Norfolk County, an area greatly underserved in terms of health care, many workers expressed fears that farm owners are in allegiance with health care professionals at the local hospital and walk-in clinic. Many workers told me they were nervous to access health care at these locations because they were afraid that their employer would be notified. Simcoe has a small population base, with very few existing medical services, so workers' concerns about confidentiality are certainly founded. In my experience, the health care professionals in this area often did have close relationships with local farm owners; thus, workers' fears were warranted. For all SAWP workers, the fear of repatriation is ever-present in Canada; one survey respondent astutely described this as "mental slavery", because the fear makes the workers do whatever the boss demands. Workers' fears of repatriation were justified. Research conducted between 2001 and 2011 uncovered a total of 787 medical repatriations of SAWP workers during this decade; most workers were repatriated for medical or surgical reasons, injuries (including poisoning), and other identifiable conditions, including 25 workers repatriated due to mental health symptoms (Orkin et al. 2014). No similar research has been conducted since, making it difficult to get an accurate idea of the scale of this phenomenon today.

### 5. Policy Recommendations

The factors associated with Jamaican workers' experiences of psychological distress in Ontario uncovered in this study are rooted in the structural conditions of the SAWP. Therefore, major structural changes to the program itself and a re-evaluation of Canadian immigration policies are required to address and improve the wellbeing of SAWP workers. Policy recommendations include ending closed work permits and the "naming system" of re-employment, and developing an open sectoral work permit system that gives workers the ability to choose/change employers; mid-season time-off for workers to visit family; developing national housing standards and an effective compliance regime to ensure safe and dignified housing; increasing access to permanent residency in Canada; extending access to health care and immigration status for injured/sick workers; and granting all migrant workers in Canada an immigration status that entitles them to the same rights and protections as Canadian workers.

### 6. Study Limitations

This ethnographic study has potential limitations. Fieldwork activities were constrained by participants' limited availability; to address this, outreach and participant observation activities in each region were conducted in accordance with local workers' scheduled time-off. The positionality of the researcher as a white, highly educated, Canadian woman, working with Black men with lower levels of education and precarious migration status, may have limited access to particular settings and topics. It took time for the sole researcher to build the trust of and rapport with participants required to facilitate full and honest discourse. The time spent by the researcher engaging in participant observation, assisting participants in emergency situations, and conducting long interviews limited the sample size, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. This study focused exclusively on the mental health experiences of men from Jamaica; further research into the mental health experiences of migrant women, and those from other Caribbean countries, is warranted.

### 7. Conclusions

This ethnographic study demonstrates that the conditions in which Jamaican SAWP workers live and work in Ontario give rise to psychological distress that ranges from mild to extreme suffering. Drawing on ethnographic data, I uncovered numerous common factors that engender distress among Jamaican workers in Ontario and organised them into five themes: (1) family, (2) work environments and SAWP relations, (3) living conditions and isolation, (4) racism and social exclusion, and (5) illness and injury. I found that Jamaican workers communicated their challenges and suffering in terms of 'stress' and their

experiences and narratives of stress were influenced by race and the history of plantation slavery in the Caribbean. Analysis of Jamaican workers' stress discourses revealed that the powerlessness, employer abuse, racism, and social marginalization they experience in Ontario are the root causes of their stress; these factors are embedded in the structure of the SAWP, therefore policy recommendations aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of SAWP workers are presented. In foregrounding the experiences of Jamaican workers, this study addresses the dearth of research on the health of Caribbean SAWP workers.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available to prevent the identification of participants.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2021/07/government-of-canada-proposes-new-regulations-to-improve-protection-of-temporary-foreign-workers.html#> (accessed on 26 October 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> In 2023, amendments were made to the SAWP Employment Contract with the Caribbean. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/agricultural/seasonal-agricultural/apply/caribbean/agreements.html> (accessed on 26 October 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> Information sourced from Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) LMIA System. The LMIA System only tracks approved TFW positions. Not all positions approved result in a work permit or a TFW entering Canada. For the number of work permits issued, see Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) Facts and Figures: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/menu-fact.asp> (accessed on 26 October 2023).

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