

Concept Paper

## Time is a Precious Commodity: Reframing Farmer Stress and Mental Health Through the Lens of Time Poverty

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### Abstract

In this conceptual paper we apply the construct of *time poverty* to a novel population, farmers struggling with stress and mental health challenges. Farmers have rates of suicide that can be over three times that of the general population, with depression and anxiety at double general population rates. These are linked to the multiple stressors farmers experience due to the unpredictable nature of their work, such as weather, input costs, commodity prices, and government regulations. In addition, there are multiple barriers to farmers seeking mental health care. Farming culture places high value on stoicism and independence and rural areas experience deficits in health and mental health care providers. Farming requires long hours and continual work. In addition, work typically takes place where the farmer lives—the family



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farm—thus precluding the protective separation of “work” and “home” seen in most other occupations. All this result in farmers often reporting that they have no time or time flexibility for healthy stress-reducing leisure activities or rest. Despite these stressors and lack of time, a specific focus on time as an important variable in farmer mental health is lacking in the literature. Without attending to the issue of time, efforts to promote stress management, mental health, and suicide prevention interventions may be less effective and will disrespect and deny the lived reality of farmers. We therefore suggest *time poverty*, defined as not having enough time to do the things one needs to do in order to tend to health, well-being, and life satisfaction, as a promising new concept when exploring and addressing farmer stress. In this conceptual article we discuss the time poverty literature, apply the concept to farmer stress, and discuss potential applications for research and intervention.

### **Keywords**

Farmer mental health; barriers to care; time poverty; farm stress

## **1. Introduction**

Studies examining the well-being and mental health of farmers, that is, individuals who cultivate, operate, or manage a farm to produce crops or raise animals for profit, have demonstrated that farmers have alarmingly high rates of suicide. One U.S. study found farmer suicide rates were 43.7 per 100,000 while the national overall average was 14.1 per 100,000 [1]. Elevated rates of depression and anxiety have also been reported [2], with farmers being twice as likely to have depression and anxiety as non-farming siblings [3]. Farmers face multiple barriers to care that must be addressed if we are to provide meaningful interventions to support farmer well-being. However, the time demands of farming, though a real barrier to care, are little mentioned in the literature, particularly when considering developed nations. In a Google Scholar search of time poverty in farmers or farming, the authors found that all of the nine articles identified examined farming only in developing nations. This article is therefore a conceptual paper exploring the idea of *time poverty* as a novel and useful construct in examining farmer stress, particularly in developed nations. Time poverty is the idea that just as in economic poverty one does not have enough money to meet one’s needs, in time poverty one does not have enough time to do the things one needs to do in order to tend to one’s health, well-being, and life satisfaction. Using this concept, we turn our attention to the time demands of farming and their impact on farmer mental health. We discuss ways in which the concept of *time poverty* could be of utility in addressing the crisis in farmer stress and mental health seen in the U.S. and other developed nations.

### **1.1 Farmer Mental Health, Stress, and Barriers to Care**

Farmers experience multiple stressors, with serious mental health sequelae. Stress and mental health issues are concerningly high in farmers. Suicide rates in farmers have been noted at rates over three times that of the general public [1]. Rudolphi and colleagues [4] found that both men and women farmers had nearly double the rates of depression and anxiety seen in the general population. Much of this can be attributed to the stressors and demands of farming and rural life.

Rural communities experience significant disparities in mental health and access to mental health care. In addition, multiple unpredictable and uncontrollable economic and policy elements of farming (weather, input costs, commodity prices, government regulations) create stress and increase anxiety [5, 6].

Despite these multiple stressors and risks to mental health, farmers have been shown to face significant barriers to accessing mental health care and engaging in behaviors that would reduce stress. These include stoicism and reluctance to admit a need for help [7], community stigma [8], lack of rural providers and distance to care [9], financial concerns and the high cost of care [10]. Even when services are available and affordable, engaging farmers can be challenging, as noted by Holstrom et al. [11], who experienced significant recruitment difficulty even with a free virtual mental health intervention for farmers.

The demands of farming itself often become a huge barrier to seeking care and engaging in health-promoting behaviors [12]. Farm work realities demand long hours, such as the reality that dairy cows require milking several times a day every day, and that planting and harvesting must occur when the weather allows and crops are ready. In addition, farmers wear many hats beyond production, and need expertise in welding, animal health, mechanical repairs, soil health, and agricultural finance. All this result in farmers often reporting that they have no time or time flexibility for healthy stress-reducing leisure activities or rest [13]. Compounding this is the fact that most farmers live where they work—the family farm. From the moment they wake up to the moment they go to bed they are surrounded by their work and continual reminders of its demands. There is no natural structural break and “leaving work at work” is not possible [13]. The chronic fatigue of farming, with continual demands and little time for rest, is shown to have a mediating role in the relationship between stressors such as loneliness at work, government regulations, lack of autonomy and farmer distress and lack of life satisfaction [14].

It is clear that the continual work demands and lack of time for rest and leisure have a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of farmers. However, a specific focus on time as an important variable in farmer mental health is lacking in the literature. While multiple qualitative studies have noted time poverty as a challenge in farming [12-14], we could find no studies that quantitatively examine the incidence of lack of time as a mental health stressor or barrier to care in farmers. We posit that without attending to the issue of time, efforts to promote stress management, mental health, and suicide prevention interventions will be less effective and will disrespect and deny the lived reality of farmers. Thus, attending to the issue of time in farmers is essential to the ongoing work of promoting farmer mental health.

## **1.2 Time Poverty**

A construct that may be useful in framing the struggle farmers face with time is that of time poverty. Initially discussed by Vickery [15] as a consideration in developing household economic models, time poverty is the idea that just as in economic poverty one does not have enough money to meet one’s needs, in time poverty one does not have enough time to do the things one needs to do in order to tend to their health, well-being, and life satisfaction. The well-being of an individual or family is thus not simply the result of their income, but also their freedom to allocate time as they choose and to have enough time to engage in work that will prevent economic poverty. Just as individuals who have economic poverty are forced to make difficult decisions between costs such

as rent or medication, individuals experiencing time poverty much choose among time-consuming actions such as working more hours or spending time with their family.

Time poverty has been defined a number of ways. From a subjective perspective, time poverty is based on the individual's perception regarding whether they experience being time pressured, measured through survey of "perceived time pressure" [16]. A more objective approach compares an individual's actual use of time to some population standard or ideal standard [17]. For example, in their study on time poverty in Guinea, Bardasi & Wodon [18] defined two thresholds—one at 1.5 times the median of the total individual hours worked in a population (based on population data collected at the national level), and a second at two times the median. It should be noted that in some studies, the unit of examination is a household rather than an individual [19].

The concept of "time" in time poverty research has also been defined in several ways. Some definitions simply bifurcate time into work and leisure [19]. Other definitions use Gershuny's [20] "triangle of daily activities" made up of paid work, unpaid work, and leisure. The most complex definition divides time into four areas: 1) contracted time, explicitly devoted to paid labor or to education; 2) committed time, used for unpaid labor such as housework and childcare; 3) necessary time, needed to maintain basic physiological functioning by eating, sleeping, etc.; and 4) leisure time, the residual time in a week after 1 through 3 are completed [21].

Much of the scholarship in the area of time poverty has come from economics and labor research. Studies include the time impact of transportation and long distances [21], the impact of lack of time on the ability to move out of poverty [22], and the disproportionate time poverty of women, and resultant inability to move into the workforce, because of the burden of care [23]. However, a meaningful portion of the literature has examined the association between time poverty and physical and emotional well-being, including diet and exercise [24, 25], self-assessed health and mental health [25, 26], sleep quality [27], depression [28], mood and affect [29], hypertension [30], missed health care appointments [31], and family conflict [32]. Many of these well-being factors have been shown to be challenges for farmers [6], thus an exploration of farmers and time poverty is warranted.

## **2. Farmers and Time Poverty**

Time poverty has been identified as a significant stressor, linked to both physical and financial well-being. The adage "time is money" seems particularly apt when considering the challenges of farming. Much farm work must happen at specific times to maximize yield and profit—when the weather is good, during daylight hours, when crops are ready for harvest, when there is high market demand or optimal commodity pricing. Despite this, time is an understudied construct in farming, particularly, as noted above, in developed countries. Research on farmer time poverty in developing countries is sparse but does exist. However, it has focused primarily on struggles between labor demands, time poverty and financial poverty, often with a gendered focus (see, for example, Bardasi & Wodon's work in Guinea [33]), rather than focusing on its impact on mental health.

Perhaps, because of the high level of technology in farming in developed nations, time poverty has not been considered an issue in these countries. However, as discussed above, qualitative studies suggest that time poverty is a significant farmer stressor and barrier to care in developed countries [12-14]. Even with technology, farmers in developed nations report struggling to find adequate labor to help on the farm [34]. Farmers and farm family members must work extended

hours to “take up the slack” and make sure farm tasks happen when, and as quickly as they need to for production success. A farmer’s decisions regarding how to spend time are financial decisions, more so than in many other occupations. Considering the significant drop in farm profits since 2022 [35], time decisions can be determinants of the success or failure of a farm.

In this light, a farmer’s barriers to seeking care and engaging in health-promoting behaviors assume new meaning. Seeking mental health counseling in a rural context, or even a visit to a primary care physician, can involve an hour’s travel each way in addition to the time for the actual appointment. Farmers may have difficulty planning future appointment dates given the shifting nature of duties and tasks that are contingent on factors such as weather and labor availability. Three hours invested in a health care visit may represent thousands of dollars in lost revenue, even beyond the higher healthcare costs experienced by farmers due to higher rates of being uninsured [36]. The recommendation to “take a few days off and get some rest with your family” or to stretch and exercise for 30 minutes daily, or even to take a few minutes to write in a journal or eat a healthy lunch (all recommendations common in mental health and well-being-based interventions) -- during harvest these can seem like deeply risky actions. Time poverty experienced by farmers is a serious threat to their well-being. Given this, using time poverty as a construct when considering ways to support farmer mental health and well-being can provide new avenues of both research and intervention.

### ***2.1 Benefits of Time Poverty Construct for Examining Farmer Mental Health Challenges***

What are the benefits of using time poverty when considering farmer mental health and well-being? First, identifying time poverty as a challenge for farmers removes individualized blame and stigma from farmer health decisions. It is no longer possible to accuse a farmer of “just not wanting to make time” for stress-reducing and health-promoting behaviors. Time is a limited commodity. A farmer cannot create more hours in a day to both engage in healthy behaviors and complete all the work that is needed for the farm’s viability. Acknowledging and identifying time poverty honors the lived experience of farming. Given farmers’ complaints that mental health providers do not understand their lives [9], reframing stresses and barriers to care as time poverty issues may encourage farmers to trust and feel more understood by providers.

Second, the existing scholarship of time poverty provides us with methodology with which to quantify and analyze the time poverty experienced by farmers. Systematic and comparable measures of time poverty in farming can help us better define the challenges farmers face in comparison to other professions. It can also help us understand the varied time challenges across farming commodities, regulatory contexts and countries. Such a methodology could allow us to identify particular causes for time poverty—a first and essential step to intervention development.

Finally, Giurgi and colleagues [37] note that there are multiple drivers of time poverty—societal norms and expectations, organizational demands, institutional and bureaucratic burdens, and psychological perceptions and values. With standardized measures of time poverty, we can begin to analyze the drivers of time poverty in farming, and thus identify potential levels of intervention. A similar strategy was seen in work done in Burkina Faso, where women’s time poverty drivers were identified, in part, as the village (organizational) demand of water and firewood collection. Projects were begun to dig local wells and provide fuel-efficient ovens, which reduced women’s workload

and increased their available time, which they used to create new businesses and better support their families [38].

Using this four-driver framework we can move beyond mental health literacy and stress management education. We can also consider more macro, policy-level interventions to address farmer time poverty drivers. Rodgers [23] identifies these interventions as classified into three broad areas: (1) physical infrastructure and technology improvements, (2) minimum wage and cash transfers, and (3) care infrastructure. Of particular relevance will be interventions regarding national-level regulations, bureaucratic requirements, and international tariff policies. All of these can create burdensome and time-consuming requirements for farmers, increasing their time poverty. These can be targets for research, as discussed below.

## **2.2 Next Steps for Research**

It is time to build a research agenda examining the impact of time poverty on farmer mental health, stress, and well-being. This will require developing effective and accurate measures and defined thresholds of time poverty in farmers, grounded in the existing work done by economists such as Kalenoski and colleagues [17] in the United States and Bardasi and Wodon [18] in Sub-Saharan Africa. With these measures we will then be able to examine the specific drivers of time poverty in farming. This could include the examination of societal/cultural drivers, such as the valorization of work and devaluation of leisure, particularly in agrarian communities [7], and psychological drivers such as farmer cognitive biases which undervalue time as a resource and disregard small time costs [37]. It could also include organizational drivers from agricultural industry, such as time-saving technologies in farming [39] or regulations prohibiting farmers from repairing their own equipment and having to wait for manufacturer repair people [40]. Also examined could be institutional drivers such as excessive and time-consuming paperwork connected with farm lending and insurance [41].

With a fuller understanding of farmer time poverty and its drivers we will be able to develop and evaluate tailored interventions that can promote farmer mental health and well-being beyond those we have already implemented [42]. This should include structural interventions grounded in policy, rural development, and labor economics, and could be informed by Rodger's [23] classification mentioned above. This would include infrastructure/technology interventions such as innovations in high-tech machinery to save time and labor on the farm. It should also include policy-level interventions exploring novel, expanded, and/or streamlined cash transfer and financial support programs through both private and governmental agricultural financing systems [41]. Finally, it should include policy changes to address the lack of mental health care infrastructure and chronophagic problems such as childcare needs in rural communities [43].

## **3. Conclusions**

Farmers experience multiple threats to their mental health and ability to ensure their own emotional well-being. High among these threats is the lack of time farmers have to obtain care, engage in health-promoting behaviors, or simply complete all the tasks they need to do to ensure the viability of their farm. Time poverty is a construct from economics that identifies the problem of having less available time than one needs to do everything needed for a healthy life, and that could be used to examine the challenges faced by farmers.

To date time poverty has not been utilized to move forward the research on farmer mental health, particularly in developed nations. Thus, we must acknowledge that our ability to predict the utility of time poverty as a research framework is currently limited by a lack of data and study using this construct, and a limited knowledge of how time poverty may vary or be constrained in different cultures or countries. Despite this, we believe there is promise in continued exploration of time poverty and farmer mental health. To develop effective interventions to promote farmer well-being, we need to recognize, articulate/measure and address the time poverty experienced by farmers. A more holistic, systemic, and macro perspective needs to be added to our existing individual level interventions to fully address stress and promote mental health in farmers.

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All authors contributed equally to this work.

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### **Competing Interests**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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