

## The Effects of Collective Trauma on Iowa Farmers

### Introduction

**Collective trauma** refers to the psychological effects that are experienced by a group of people in response to shared traumatic events (Erikson 1976). Farmers represent a unique population that is chronically exposed to potentially traumatic events particular to the agricultural industry. Farming communities in Iowa have experienced events such as:

- The 1980s Farm Crisis
- Floods, droughts, tornados, derechos, and climate change
- Soil loss, water quality, and water quantity issues
- Rapidly fluctuating input costs and “boom and bust” commodity markets
- Farm bankruptcies, foreclosures, and consolidation as well as loss of community structure
- High rates of on-farm injury and farmer suicides

**Research Gap:** Exposure to such events can have dramatic effects on the people who experience them and the communities they live in. Research exists examining the behavioral health aspects of stress in farmers, but no studies have examined the lived experiences of farmers within the framework of collective trauma. While research on farmer stress is important, these studies typically do not focus on potential systemic root causes of farmer stress and how to address those. Furthermore, trauma can have specific and long-lasting detrimental effects on the body and mental cognition that goes beyond the experience of stress (Van der Kolk 1994), and exposure to trauma can have significant impacts on decision making (Kim and Lee 2014). Understanding collective trauma in farmers can therefore aid policymakers in developing trauma-informed farm policy (Bowen and Murshid 2016) and can help conservation professionals better understand how such experiences affect farmer adoption of conservation practices.

### Methods

**Screening Criteria:** For collection of qualitative interview data:

#### *Behavioral Health Experts*

- At least one of the following:
  - a university faculty member who has published research about the behavioral health of Iowa farmers
  - an Extension faculty or staff member at ISU who has designed and/or worked within extension programs specifically aimed at addressing the behavioral health of Iowa farmers
  - a current or formerly licensed behavioral health practitioner who has provided services to Iowa farmers

#### *Farmers*

- A current Iowa farmer who participated in either the 2020 or 2021 annual Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll (an annual longitudinal survey of Iowa farmers) and whose prior survey responses indicated that they had experienced at least one of the following:
  - Significant flooding
  - Significant drought
  - A decline in their quality of life

**Data Collection:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with approximately 5 behavioral health experts and 35 farmers in Iowa. Behavioral experts are asked their perspectives on the psychological aspects of how collective trauma affects farmers as well as how to safely approach potentially difficult and sensitive issues with farmers during interviews. Farmers are asked to describe their experiences of various types of traumatic events and conditions they have experienced within the context of their farming operation. They are also asked to provide their perspectives on how these experiences have affected their farm management decisions (including conservation adoption) as well as how these types of experiences have affected their rural communities.



### Preliminary Results

**Data Analysis:** We have conducted interviews with two behavioral health experts and nine farmers. We use grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990) to analyze the interview transcripts to develop a model of how collective trauma is experienced by farmers and how these experiences affect their management decisions, including conservation adoption. The following is a collection of selected quotes illustrating emergent variables.

#### Manifestations of Trauma

*...in 2013, the creek came up to our driveway. So it's funny how those marked your time, you remember those years...I'm concerned that the flooding will get more severe.* –Farmer

*And too often we get ourselves in a hurry, and that's when you get hurt. And things that'll make you wake up [at night], feeling like, "Man, that was stupid."* –Farmer

*And we've had that happen before, when the market seemed to be pretty good, and [something happens] that sends it south for several days, and you don't—You're just watching it, and it's gut wrenching.* –Farmer

#### Intergenerational Trauma

*I'm going to start with my dad. He grew up in the depression thing, through that. That's what he remembers is, he had to do everything he could do to save that farm and so it was touch and go. His dad, his uncles didn't lose their farm, but they weren't big. But he was always like, "Don't get more land." So then I learned it from him, that same philosophy. I never grew big...[Other people] have thousands of acres that they own...where I never really had that courage.* –Farmer

#### Loss of Community

*And the population dwindled, the [school] class sizes dropped in half, and some of the churches disappeared, and there just wasn't enough people going to certain churches, the churches had to consolidate...And a lot of houses, lot of building sites, got bulldozed. They're not worth anything...And the population dropped so dramatically. And then recently we lost all our grocery stores.* –Farmer

*There's less of us out here than there—Every year, it seems like—farms are getting bigger, and for whatever reason, you can be on the wrong side of things, and yeah, and it could take you down.* –Farmer

### Preliminary Results Continued

#### Trauma and Suicide Risk

*I think the worst trauma a farmer can experience is the loss of their land, loss of that tradition, loss of their way of life. So when their farm is at risk, that's when things get bad.*

–Behavioral Health Expert

*My dad was current on the loan, but the bank wanted to call in the loan because they wanted the capital. So they were trying to foreclose on him. He was all depressed or whatever and was contemplating suicide or thought about ways he could do it to get the insurance and whatever. Luckily, he didn't do it...the '80s was a financially hard time that way for my folks, and that's shaped some decisions.* –Farmer

#### Effects on Decision Making

*Well, obviously they may make a little bit more rash decisions, maybe they sell a product a little bit too soon or a little bit too late, hold out for the price to go up and it doesn't. And if they make a decision based on emotion instead of rationalization...then they may not get the profit they are looking for...* –Behavioral Health Expert

*The thing that probably influences us to do it more than anything is watching people who don't [adopt conservation practices]. Who go out with a combine and are working on soybeans, and when they're only partway done with the field, the moldboard plow is out there doing the rest of the field before he's done combining. And the erosion that come comes from that was just unreal...And there's dirt in the ditches and rivers where there should be waterways.* –Farmer

*So when you do things, your hesitancy to plant early, because maybe you'll get froze off... Last year we got froze off because we did no-till...So that affected the yield.* –Farmer

### Conclusions

Preliminary results suggest that chronic stress and disaster-related events that farmers and their communities collectively experience can be described as traumatic, manifesting as mental and physical conditions in individuals and loss of community in rural areas. Some aspects of this trauma can be described as intergenerational (Grand and Salberg 2020), being passed from parents to their children. Farming-related collective trauma appears to affect the risk of death by suicide, and there is evidence that these traumatic experiences directly influence farm management decisions. This information will be used to develop recommendations for trauma-informed farm policy (Bowen and Murshid 2016) to help improve the quality of life for farmers and their communities as well as to potentially increase rates of conservation adoption.

### References

- Bowen, E. and Murshid, N. 2016. Trauma-informed social policy: A conceptual framework for policy analysis and advocacy. *American journal of public health*, 106 (2), pp.223-229.
- Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. 1990. “Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria.” *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie* 19 (6): 418–27.
- Erikson, K. 1976. *Everything in its path*. Simon and Schuster.
- Grand, S. and Salberg, J. 2020. Trans-Generational trauma transmission. In A. Hamburger, C. Hancheva & V. Volkan (Eds.), *Social trauma. An Interdisciplinary Textbook* (pp. 209–218). New York: Springer.
- Kim, Y. and Lee, J. 2014. The long-run impact of a traumatic experience on risk aversion. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 108, pp.174-186.
- Van der Kolk, B.A. 1994. The body keeps the score: Memory and the evolving psychobiology of posttraumatic stress. *Harvard review of psychiatry*, 1 (5), pp.253-265.