

# FARM WORKER ISSUES: HOUSING

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Substandard housing conditions are a common issue farm workers face. Not only do many workers live in crowded, unsanitary conditions, but they often lack basic utilities, live in isolated areas far away from important services like health clinics, grocery stores, and public transportation, and in many cases must pay exorbitant rates for rent.

## Types of Farm Worker Housing

There are different types of housing that farm workers live in, varying widely based on geographic location, immigration status, etc. The most common types of farm worker housing are:

- **Government housing:** in order to qualify for affordable subsidized housing, farm workers must be documented. While it's impossible to accurately measure exactly how many farm workers are undocumented, estimates show that at least 6 out of 10 of our country's farm workers are undocumented (Southern Poverty Law Center).
- **Grower-owned housing.** By law, growers are required to provide housing for guest workers: non-immigrant seasonal workers on a special temporary visa called H-2A. However, H-2A workers account for only about 3% of the nation's agricultural workforce. For the majority of workers living in grower-owned housing, rent is deducted from the farm workers' paycheck.
- **Privately rented housing.** Farm workers in this case pay a private owner for rent.

In the case of the latter housing options-- grower-owned and privately rented housing--the landowner can have a monopoly on available housing, which allows them to overcharge. This is especially true in isolated rural areas, where other housing options simply don't exist, and thus workers have no alternative but to pay these rates.

## Inflated Housing Prices

For example, in Immokalee, Florida, some trailers rent for \$500 PER WEEK—more than a good-sized apartment in Manhattan—because of their proximity to the parking lot where workers line up in the morning to find work. Because it's so expensive, 10 workers will pack into one trailer in order to afford rent.

A high ratio of farm workers to available utilities leads to further problems. For example, multiple people share sinks, bathrooms, showers, cooking and laundry facilities, etc. In terms of health, this is problematic because lack of hygiene facilities can promote pesticide exposure and the spread of disease. It's important for a worker who has been exposed to pesticides to be able to shower and wash their clothes, but with so many people living in one building, this can be difficult.

In other places, in order to turn a profit, landowners charge rent fees on a per person basis instead of a total for the building. These per-person rates make life even more difficult for farm worker families, who have to pay separately for each child. In general, lack of government oversight on housing standards and regulations enables growers and private renters to get away with providing substandard housing.

## **Sources:**

- *Cornell Institute for Public Affairs*
- *Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC)*
- *Farmworker Justice*



Youth & Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry

[www.nfwm-yaya.org](http://www.nfwm-yaya.org)