

FARM WORKER ISSUES: HOUSING

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.

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, [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) estimates show that at least 6 out of 10 of our country's farm workers are undocumented.

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 8% 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.

Inflated Housing Prices

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.

For example, in Immokalee, Florida, this trailer rents for up to \$500 PER WEEK because of its 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 this 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.

It is the case that where population density and housing costs are high, such as California, farm worker families migrating for work have resorted to living in tents, abandoned buildings, tool sheds, converted school buses and chicken coops.

Farm worker housing in rural areas may be intentionally hidden from public view

A 2015 study of the Wake Forest Medical School Center for Worker Health, "[NC Hidden Farmworker Labor Camps in North Carolina: An Indicator of Structural Vulnerability](#)," found that crowding, lack of access to sufficient bathing facilities, pest infestation, and structural damage are common to dwellings in farmworker labor camps. And the study found that more than one third (37.8%) of the farm worker labor camps were hidden, making the residents more vulnerable and making the provider of substandard housing less accountable to the public.

For sources and to learn more:

- [Cornell Institute for Public Affairs](#)
- [Farmworker Justice](#)
- [Coalition of Immokalee Workers \(CIW\)](#)
- [Wake Forest Medical School Center for Worker Health](#)

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NATIONAL FARM WORKER MINISTRY
nfwm@nfwm.org