

Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Housing

Housing Assistance Council

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Farmworkers are among the hardest-working people in the United States. They are also among the poorest. Farmworker poverty, along with other factors, leads directly to a lack of decent, safe, and affordable housing. Farmworkers face the entire range of housing problems: substandard housing quality, crowding, unaffordable housing costs, and low homeownership rates.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

There are few reliable data on farmworker demographics, economic conditions, and housing conditions in the United States. The decennial Census does not collect information on farmworkers as a distinct population. Estimates of the numbers of seasonal farmworkers and their dependents range from 1.9 to 4 million.

The U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) provides some demographic information. Eighty-eight percent of all farmworkers surveyed by NAWS were of Hispanic heritage. The next largest sub-population (7 percent) was non-Hispanic whites. Eighty-one percent of the NAWS-surveyed farmworkers were born outside the United States. There is a common misperception that all farmworkers are undocumented; this is clearly not the case. Estimates vary widely but agree that at a minimum almost half, and possibly a far greater proportion, of farmworkers are in the country legally.

Approximately 56 percent of those surveyed by NAWS were migrant workers, traveling among regions and states following crop seasons and labor demand. Generally they move in three streams: the Eastern stream, originating in Florida and extending up the East Coast; the Midwestern stream, based in Texas and moving north to the Great Lakes and Plains states; and the Western stream, beginning in California and spreading along the West Coast.

About 44 percent of farmworkers do not migrate, instead residing in their communities year-round. A large proportion of them live in the home base states of California,

Texas, and Florida, which have longer growing seasons than others.

Farmworkers are among the poorest people in the country, with a poverty rate of 61 percent. In 1997 through 1998, half of all individual farmworkers earned less than \$7,500 per year and half of all farmworker families earned less than \$10,000 per year. The seasonal nature of farm work contributes to these low incomes.

HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS

Due in large part to their low wages, farmworkers face significant difficulties in finding affordable housing. A survey conducted by the Housing Assistance Council in 1997-2000 found that about one-third of the farmworkers surveyed were cost-burdened, paying more than 30 percent of their monthly incomes for housing. More than 85 percent of these cost-burdened households included children.

**Type and Source of Farmworker Housing Units
HAC Survey**

Type of Housing	All Units	Private Market	Employer-Owned
Single-Family	42%	43%	39%
Apartment	21%	24%	14%
Mobile Home	15%	14%	14%
Duplex/Triplex	15%	15%	13%
Dorm/Barracks	4%	1%	15%
Motel	2%	3%	.1%
Campsite/Tent	.5%	.5%	.5%
No Shelter	.1%	.1%	.1%

Farmworkers often live in overcrowded homes, perhaps in order to reduce their housing costs. Excluding dormitories and barracks (structures designed for high occupancy), almost 52 percent of the units surveyed by HAC were crowded. This figure is almost ten times as high as the national average. Children lived in 74 percent of these crowded units.

HAC's survey found that 17 percent of units were severely substandard and an additional 16 percent were moderately substandard. Mobile homes, 44 percent of which were severely or moderately substandard, were the type of unit most likely to be categorized this way. Serious structural problems, which include sagging roofs, house

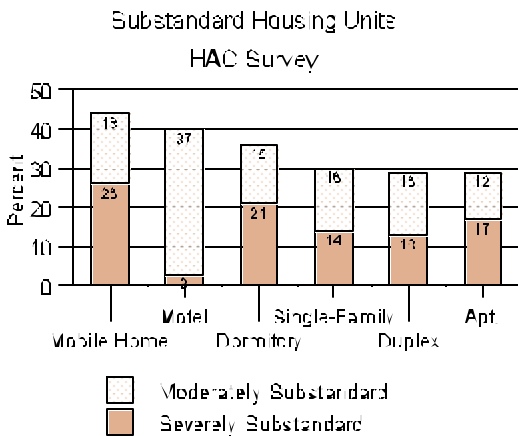
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frames, and porches, were evident in 22 percent of the units, and 15 percent had holes or large sections of shingles missing from their roofs. Foundation damage was observed in 10 percent. Interior problems were also prevalent: holes were noted in the walls of 22 percent of the units surveyed, and unsanitary conditions, such as rodent or insect infestation, were detected in 19 percent of them.

Most farmworker-occupied units have common household appliances such as a stove, refrigerator, bathtub, and toilet, but in 22 percent of the HAC-surveyed units at least one of these appliances and fixtures was missing or broken, a rate far higher than among general population. In addition, almost 52 percent of the surveyed units lacked access to working laundry facilities, and almost 43 percent lacked a working telephone.

The full extent of the housing crisis facing farmworkers is revealed by the numbers who face multiple housing problems simultaneously. Of all the substandard units (excluding dormitories and barracks) surveyed by HAC, 20 percent were also overcrowded. In 11 percent of all the surveyed units both substandard conditions and cost burden were found. Units with all three problems – substandard conditions, crowding, and cost burden – comprised 19 percent of all substandard units and 6 percent of all units surveyed.



Households with children occupied 65 percent of the substandard units. Additionally, farmworker housing units with numerous serious problems were very likely to house children. Youngsters lived in 70 percent of the surveyed units that were both substandard and crowded. Children were present in fully 94 percent of the units that were substandard and crowded and whose occupants had housing cost burden.

In addition to high housing costs, crowding, and substandard housing, farmworkers encounter unique environmental hazards related to housing, particularly the danger of exposure to pesticides. Overall, 26 percent of HAC-surveyed units were directly adjacent to

fields where pesticides were applied. Among units next to treated fields, 53 percent lacked a working tub/shower, laundry machine, or both. Children lived in 60 percent of all surveyed units adjacent to fields where pesticides were applied.

Farmworkers in different migrant streams may face somewhat different housing problems. For example, HAC's survey found that those living in the Northwest were particularly likely to have incomes below area medians and to experience housing cost burden. Those in Florida, on the other hand, were especially likely to live in substandard and/or crowded homes.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

Eligible farmworkers may benefit from federal, state, and local housing assistance programs. Two federal programs – the Section 514 loan and Section 516 grant programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service – fund development of housing specifically for farmworkers. Demand for this funding far exceeds the available dollars, however.

With the support of family and social networks, community-based organizations, and government programs at local, state, and federal levels, many farmworker families are able to meet their housing needs. The challenge is to expand the resources and opportunities available to farmworkers.

For more information see Taking Stock: Rural People, Poverty, and Housing at the Turn of the 21st Century, published by the Housing Assistance Council in December 2002, and No Refuge From the Fields: Findings From a Survey of Farmworker Housing Conditions in the United States, published by HAC in 2001. This Information Sheet was prepared by HAC and is drawn from those reports. The work that provided the bases for those publications was supported by funding under Cooperative Agreements with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service, by the Ford Foundation, and by the F.B. Heron Foundation. The substance and funding of that work are dedicated to the public. HAC is solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication and such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government.

HAC, founded in 1971, is a nonprofit corporation that supports the development of rural low-income housing nationwide. HAC provides technical housing services, loans from a revolving fund, housing program and policy assistance, research and demonstration projects, and training and information services. HAC is an equal opportunity lender.

