

Migrant Health Issues

Housing
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Although they toil to bring a bounteous harvest to our tables, farmworkers are often faced with some of the poorest living conditions in their communities. Many farmworkers live in substandard and unsafe housing that lacks adequate sanitation and protection from the elements, and in many cases this housing is also overcrowded. Overcrowded and substandard housing can contribute to the contraction and spread of disease, as well as injury through household accidents. Children are especially vulnerable to the health and safety risks posed by poor quality and overcrowded conditions.

While there is much anecdotal information, there is little national data on the type and quality of housing occupied by farmworkers. One effort to gather this information is a national survey of farmworker housing conditions undertaken by the Housing Assistance Council (HAC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve affordable housing in rural areas around the country. Offering the most recent research on farmworker housing conditions, this survey highlights some of the most pressing housing problems experienced by farmworkers (Housing Assistance Council [HAC], 2001).

Housing Conditions

Crowded housing is a persistent problem for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. A farmworker testifying before the National Advisory Council on Migrant Health said that, "People began to tell us...how much they have suffered because they are sent to one house, crowded. They have to work hard. They don't have a good mattress to sleep on, and they are mistreated" ("Testimony," 1999). Among the over 4,600 housing units surveyed by HAC around the country,

52 percent were crowded. (Federal standards classify housing as crowded if there is an average of more than one person per room, excluding kitchens and bathrooms.) Seventy-four percent of the households in crowded units had children. By contrast, the 1997 American Housing Survey found that 3 percent of all U.S. households were living in crowded conditions (see Table 5 of HAC, 2000, for complete data).

Many farmworkers crowd units to limit the cost impact of housing on their low incomes. One farmworker bluntly described how crowding is related to the need to share rent:

"We have to put up with this because we can't afford anything else," said Maria-Guadalupe Sanchez, a farm worker who lives with 13 other people in a three-bedroom house in Watsonville, California (Greenhouse, 1998).

HAC's survey findings provide some support for the connections among between crowding, income, and housing cost. Almost 60 percent of the farmworker households surveyed had low incomes, which means they earned 80 percent or less of Area Median Income (AMI). Even modestly priced housing may be unaffordable when households make little money. HAC's survey found that 29 percent of farmworker households paid more than 30 percent of their incomes for housing, the federal standard for housing cost burden. Housing cost burden did vary in different regions of the country, with this problem most prevalent in the Western migrant stream where 43 percent of farmworkers were burdened by housing costs. Another incentive for farmworkers to crowd their housing is that many migrant farmworkers must also support a

home-based household. Sharing rent allows them to send a portion of their pay home to support their families (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994 – This report is based on data from the 1993 National Agricultural Workers Survey [NAWS]). It notes that international migrants in 1993 comprised 71 percent of all migrant farmworkers. While 64 percent of these international immigrants were married, only 16 percent traveled with their spouses.)

Not only is farmworker housing often very crowded, but in many cases these units lack adequate sanitation and working appliances. Not atypical is the following description of the kitchen and bathroom a Haitian farmworker had to share with occupants of four other dormitory-style rooms in Immokalee, Florida:

The shower has filthy, crumbling concrete walls – the kind that won't come clean. There is a metal sink held by a rotting plywood counter, and the toilet often backs up, so the tiny room reeks of sewage. At six feet tall, Etienne nearly bumps against the sagging ceiling of the narrow community kitchen, where days before a leak had puddled more than an inch of water (Edwards, 1998).

Under these conditions, many farmworkers are unable to store food safely, prepare a warm meal, or take a shower after a hard day of work in the fields. Although most of the units surveyed by HAC in the Eastern stream had a working stove, refrigerator, bathtub and toilet, in 22 percent of the units one of these was broken.

Pesticide exposure is a health and safety issue unique to farmworkers, and the lack of laundry facilities in farmworker housing can increase the danger of pesticide poisoning. More than 26 percent of the units surveyed by HAC were directly adjacent to pesticide-treated fields. Among these units, 53 percent lacked a working bathtub/shower, a laundry machine, or both.

Missing or broken appliances are not the only substandard housing problems encountered by farmworkers, nor are substandard living conditions confined to a few locales. Housing problems can run from peeling paint to broken windows to serious structural defi-

ciencies, and each may contribute to poor health and safety concerns. Serious structural problems such as sagging roofs, porches, or house frames were found in 22 percent of the HAC survey units. Related problems included holes in the roof, found in 15 percent of the units, and foundation damage in 10 percent of the units. Thirty-six percent of the units surveyed had broken windows or windows missing screens, exposing occupants to insects, dust, or other irritants. Almost 41 percent of the units had peeling paint on their exteriors, and 29 percent had peeling paint or broken plaster inside. Evidence of leaks was found in 29 percent of units, and exposed wiring was observed in 9 percent of the housing.

HAC developed a measure of substandard housing that characterizes units as “severely substandard” if they lack complete indoor plumbing and/or have substantial physical deficiencies, and “moderately substandard” for those units that have complete plumbing but quite a few exterior and interior problems. Among all the units HAC surveyed, 17 percent were severely substandard and 16 percent were moderately substandard. Sixty-five percent of severely substandard housing was occupied by households that included children. Substandard housing was most prevalent in the Eastern migrant stream, with 43 percent of Eastern stream units either severely or moderately substandard. Florida had the greatest prevalence of substandard housing among the states surveyed, with 31 percent of Florida farmworker housing in severely substandard condition and 26 percent in moderately substandard condition.

Overall, Florida and the Northwest region (Idaho, Oregon and Washington) had the greatest confluence of housing problems. Compared with California, the home base state of the Western stream, the Northwest region had a greater percentage of households with low incomes, cost-burdened households, substandard units, and a slightly higher rate of overcrowding. Compared with upstream areas in the Eastern migrant stream, Florida also had greater incidence of all of these problems. Generally, the prevalence of households with low incomes and housing cost-burdened was greatest in the Northwest, while substandard housing and crowding was most pronounced in Florida.

Health and Housing

Poor quality and crowded housing can contribute to a number of serious health problems. Crowded conditions are associated with increased incidence of such infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza. Lack of sanitary facilities, sanitary facilities located in sleeping areas, and broken cooking appliances can contribute to the contraction of hepatitis, gastroenteritis, and other conditions. These conditions can also expose food preparation surfaces to pesticides and fertilizers (InterAmerica Research Associates, 1978). Water leakage and broken windows expose residents to irritants such as dust and mold, which can complicate respiratory problems such as asthma. Long-term exposure to such irritants can cause serious health complications among children with allergies (Sandel and Sharfstein, 1998). Rodent and insect infestations also contribute to poor health: for example, children with asthma or allergies who are exposed to cockroaches in the home miss more school, suffer more hospitalization, and have more unscheduled visits to health clinics (Sarpong, et al., 1996).

Many farmworker units are older, and although HAC's survey does not determine the age of the housing examined, the prevalence of peeling exterior and interior paint raises the possibility of lead poisoning, especially when children are present. Even low levels of lead exposure can have profound impacts, dramatically decreasing IQ and motor function. Long-term exposure can damage the blood, brain and reproductive system. Lead exposure can also impact children's education, with one study finding that children with increased lead levels were seven times more likely to drop out of high school and five times more likely to have a disability (Needleman, et al., 1990).

Some housing problems are a direct threat to safety. Most notable among these are sagging structural features, which HAC found in a significant number of units. Another physical danger is exposed wiring, which is not only a shock hazard, but also can cause fires in the home. Broken steps and holes in the floor can cause injuries, especially to children.

Federal Agencies and Farmworker Housing Development

The only federal production programs dedicated to farmworker housing are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service (RHS), referred to as the Section 514 loan and Section 516 grant programs. Since 1962, these programs have supported the production of approximately 17,000 farmworker housing units. However, the funding levels do not approach the level of demand. In 1997, a survey of 30 nonprofit housing developers found they had prepared over \$134 million in applications, while the combined Section 514/516 appropriations that year totaled \$28 million (HAC, 1997). The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) also supports farmworker housing development through technical assistance grants to experienced housing organizations that help local organizations build new farmworker housing. While it has no housing programs specific to farmworkers, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a variety of programs that farmworker housing advocates have used to build affordable housing for their clients. However, greater targeting of HUD resources to farmworker housing projects and initiatives could substantially increase the number of new projects providing affordable housing options to farmworkers.

Conclusion

Improving farmworker health does not rest solely with the healthcare organizations working in the farmworker community. Health is impacted by a variety of quality of life factors, and chief among these are the living conditions in which farmworkers find themselves. Safe, decent, affordable housing can reduce the incidence and spread of disease, reduce the likelihood of household accidents, and improve household stability, especially for children.

Increased funding for the RHS Section 514 and Section 516 programs is an essential step to developing new projects that will serve farmworkers with the lowest incomes. Greater coordination among RHS,

DOL, and HUD can generate tremendous resources to build new farmworker housing and maintain the quality of existing farmworker housing.

If farmworker housing development benefits from interagency collaboration, farmworkers' overall quality of life can also be enhanced by greater collaboration among different farmworker service networks. For example, farmworker housing developers are hampered by a lack of information on farmworker housing needs in their locales. Health care organizations with outreach workers, for example, could conduct housing needs assessments as they perform their outreach duties. New farmworker housing projects can also serve as the locus for area service provision to farmworkers. Community rooms can be used for classes or as computer centers, daycare can be provided onsite, and projects can serve as well-known central meeting places between outreach workers and their clients. Given the magnitude of economic and social needs among farmworkers, housing initiatives can play a valuable role in improving the quality of life for the farmworker community.

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Copies may be obtained through the following sources:

*National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., Buda TX
Phone: (512) 312-2700
<http://www.ncfh.org>*

*Migrant Health Branch, Bethesda, MD
Bureau of Primary Health Care
Phone: (301) 594-4300
<http://bphc.hrsa.gov/migrant/>*

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