



September 2026

RURAL REPORT

The Housing Ecosystem for Agricultural Workers



Photo: Tim Mossholder

**What We Know, What We Don't Know, and a Plan to
Better Understand Housing Options and Access for
Agricultural Workers**



Housing Assistance Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC), in partnership with UnidosUS, undertook research to better understand the housing conditions and dynamics facing agricultural workers. This report draws upon existing data, research, and insights from national and community experts to summarize what is currently known about agricultural workers and their housing circumstances. Equally important, it develops and tests a framework for assessing agricultural worker housing across multiple geographies and community types. While not intended to serve as a comprehensive national assessment, the research advances the understanding of agricultural worker housing in a continually changing environment by identifying what is known and what remains unknown. Ultimately, the report outlines an approach for addressing critical knowledge gaps and informing strategies, policies, and investments that can strengthen the housing ecosystem for the nation's essential agricultural workforce.

Agricultural workers are essential to the nation's food system, but the workforce and their housing needs continue to change and evolve. Millions of workers support U.S. agricultural production and food processing, yet agricultural workers remain among the nation's more economically vulnerable workers. Over the past several decades, immigration policy, labor-market shifts, technological change, climate events, and other forces have reshaped agricultural labor.

- Farmworkers are older, more experienced, and substantially less migratory than in previous decades; approximately 85 percent are now considered settled rather than migratory.
- More workers also live with their families in the United States, creating greater demand for stable, year-round housing rather than housing systems designed primarily around a temporary or highly mobile workforce.
- Relatively low wages and poverty continue to constrain housing choices, while immigration and documentation uncertainty can affect workers' willingness or ability to seek assistance, report poor housing conditions, or participate in research and public programs.

These changes challenge longstanding assumptions about who agricultural workers are, where they live, and the types of housing they need.

Agricultural worker housing is best understood as an interconnected ecosystem of private-market, employer-provided, and government-supported housing. The report establishes these three pathways as a framework for understanding how agricultural workers obtain housing and where gaps occur.

The **private market** accommodates the large majority of farmworkers, but low incomes, limited rental supply, rising housing costs, and screening or documentation requirements can restrict access to safe and affordable homes.

Employer-provided housing has historically served migrant and seasonal workers and remains particularly important in remote agricultural areas; its role is changing as the rapidly expanding H-2A program requires participating employers to provide housing for temporary foreign workers.

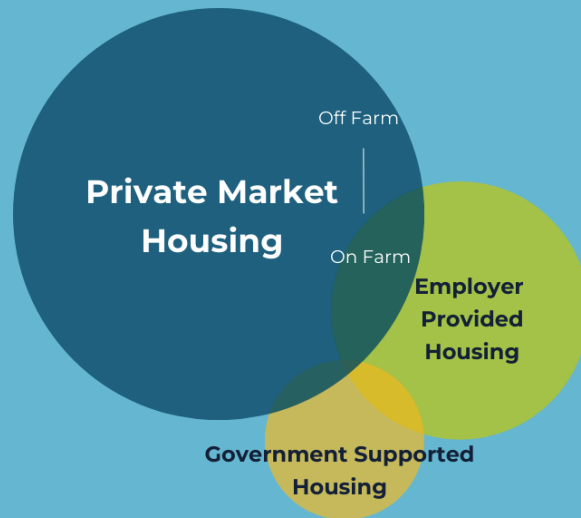
Government-supported housing serves a much smaller share of workers – approximately 2 percent – but often provides some of the most affordable and higher-quality housing available to agricultural households.

No one sector, however, adequately meets the full range of need. Instead, agricultural workers navigate an overlapping and often fragmented system in which housing availability, affordability, quality, and access vary considerably by geography, agricultural industry, and worker population.

Importantly, most agricultural workers depend on a housing system that was not designed around agricultural employment and offers them few special protections against low wages, seasonality, housing shortages, or documentation barriers.

Affordability and crowding remain defining housing challenges, while existing data provide only a partial picture of conditions nationally. Agricultural workers disproportionately contend with low and variable earnings, constrained housing supply, older housing stock, and limited affordable options. National data indicate that crowding among farmworkers is substantially more prevalent than among U.S. households generally, while housing costs can consume a significant portion of already limited incomes. The magnitude of these challenges is difficult to measure comprehensively. Much of the available national information comes from datasets designed primarily to measure employment, demographics, wages, agricultural production, or program participation – not housing quality and need. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) remains particularly valuable but focuses

Agricultural Worker Housing Ecosystem



primarily on crop workers and contains limited measures of housing affordability and physical condition, leaving important agricultural populations such as dairy and processing workers less visible. Employer-provided housing is similarly difficult to assess consistently, while government-supported housing information is dispersed across programs and agencies. These limitations create significant blind spots for policymakers, practitioners, employers, and communities attempting to understand and respond to agricultural worker housing needs.

A community-centered housing ecosystem assessment can help bridge the gap between what current national data tell us and what agricultural workers experience locally.

To demonstrate an alternative approach, HAC developed and tested a framework that combines demographic and housing data, administrative records, stakeholder interviews, field observations, housing inventories, and market analysis. Tested at county and community scales in California's Central Valley, the approach demonstrates the value of examining the three housing markets together while also recognizing that local infrastructure, environmental conditions, institutions, development capacity, and community relationships influence housing outcomes.

Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS) data provide a particularly promising means of examining the private-market housing circumstances of agricultural worker households.

While administrative data can help identify employer-provided and government-supported resources. But quantitative data alone cannot capture the full housing ecosystem. Interviews, site visits, and engagement with trusted community organizations revealed conditions and context that would otherwise remain obscured, reinforcing the importance of pairing statistical analysis with community-informed research.

The test community assessment demonstrates both the severity of agricultural worker housing pressures and the importance of understanding them within their local context.

At the community level, the assessment identified a particularly tight housing market characterized by affordability pressures, crowding, limited housing turnover, infrastructure constraints, lingering disaster-recovery needs, and barriers to new development. At the same time, the community possesses important assets, including dedicated USDA farm labor housing, mutual self-help homeownership, other affordable housing investments, and experienced community-based organizations. These findings underscore a central message from the assessment: agricultural communities share many common housing conditions and challenges, but their housing outcomes are also shaped by distinctly local combinations of markets, infrastructure, environmental circumstances, institutions, and community capacity.

Improving agricultural worker housing will require coordinated action across housing policy, community development, infrastructure, and the agricultural sector rather than a single programmatic solution. The report calls for housing policies and eligibility requirements that better reflect today's agricultural workforce;

modernization and expansion of federal farmworker housing resources; preservation and repair of existing affordable housing; greater attention to infrastructure and development barriers; and stronger inclusion of agricultural workers, local organizations, and rural communities in housing policy decisions.

Certain populations and resources warrant increased attention. Dairy and processing workers, employer-provided housing, H-2A-related housing demand, and agricultural workers experiencing housing instability or homelessness need further analysis. Existing federal resources remain important but are often small relative to need, difficult to use, or poorly aligned with contemporary development costs and workforce realities. State programs, blended financing, preservation strategies, and stronger community-development capacity represent important complements to traditional federal programs.

Better data – and a renewed national assessment – are foundational to developing more effective agricultural worker housing strategies. The research demonstrates how fragmented existing information remains. Multiple datasets and extensive stakeholder engagement were necessary to assemble even an incomplete picture of agricultural worker housing. The report recommends sustaining and expanding national data collection, strengthening the housing content and preservation of NAWS, improving information on employer-provided housing and agricultural sectors not adequately represented in existing datasets, and pursuing community-centered research that incorporates worker experience while maintaining heightened standards for confidentiality and data protection.

More than two decades have passed since a large-scale national assessment of agricultural worker housing conditions was published. The framework tested through this research offers a foundation that could be refined and expanded into such an assessment – combining consistent quantitative measures with locally grounded analysis to identify not only housing needs, but also effective strategies and opportunities for investment. A renewed national assessment would provide policymakers, housing providers, employers, researchers, and communities with a stronger evidence base for targeting resources, measuring change, and building housing systems responsive to the realities of today's agricultural workforce.

Agricultural worker housing challenges cannot be addressed through a single program or policy change. Meaningful progress will require coordinated investments across housing markets, improved data collection, stronger infrastructure systems, preservation of existing affordable housing, and policies that reflect the realities of today's agricultural workforce. Key recommendations from this report include:

- **Modernize agricultural worker housing policy to reflect today's workforce.**
- **Increase and preserve the supply of affordable housing in agricultural communities.**

- **Strengthen community capacity, infrastructure, and worker participation.**
- **Build a modern agricultural worker housing data and research system.**

Ultimately, ensuring access to safe, affordable, and stable housing for agricultural workers is not just a housing issue. It is integral to the stability of agricultural communities, the well-being of workers and their families, the resilience of rural economies, and the long-term strength of the nation's food system.



HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

1828 L Street NW
Suite 505
Washington DC 20036

202-842-8600
hac@ruralhome.org

[**www.ruralhome.org**](http://www.ruralhome.org)

