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

THE HOUSING ECOSYSTEM FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, AND A PLAN TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOUSING OPTIONS AND ACCESS FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

Housing Assistance Council

September 2026

1828 L Street, NW Suite 505
Washington, DC 20036
202-842-8600

www.ruralhome.org

This research report was prepared by the Housing Assistance Council (HAC). Manda LaPorte, Blue Miller, and Lance George, are the authors of this report. Support for this report was provided in part by UnidosUS. Special thanks to Laura Arce (UnidosUS), Tom Collishaw (Self-Help Enterprises), and Olivia Gomez (Self-Help Enterprises) for their thoughtful participation, insights, and expertise on this research.

HAC is solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations of data contained in this report.

The Housing Assistance Council is a national nonprofit corporation that helps build homes and communities across rural America. For over 50 years, HAC has supported local efforts to improve rural housing conditions.

HAC is an equal opportunity employer and housing provider.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is grateful to the many people who contributed to this research. The preparation of this report spanned many months, thousands of miles traveling across the nation, numerous interviews, and countless hours of data exploration and analysis. While it is not possible to properly acknowledge everyone who offered their talents, knowledge, and insights, the following people and organizations are among those who were instrumental to this project.

Sandra Aguilar - *Catholic Charities of Central Washington*
Gladys Aguillar - *Florida Non-Profit Housing*
Rodrigo Alatriste-Diaz - *UC Merced*
Maribel Andrade
Laura Arce - *UnidosUS*
Veronica Beaty - *California Coalition for Rural Housing*
Linda Braunschweiger - *Housing Trust Fund*
Ellen Brokaw - *Brokaw Ranch Company*
Ingrid Brostrom - *UC Merced*
Luisa Café - *California Coalition for Rural Housing*
Marita Canedo - *Migrant Justice*
Lucy Castillo - *Florida Non-Profit Housing*
Tom Collishaw - *Self-Help Enterprises*
Jennifer Cossyleon - *UC Merced*
Karen Flock - *Ventura Housing*
Olivia Gomez - *Self-Help Enterprises*
Alexis Guild - *Farmworker Justice*
Peter Hainley - *Casa of Oregon*
Bryan Ketcham - *Catholic Charities of Central Washington*
Julio Lamas - *CA Housing & Community Development*
Mareen McGuire - *Farm Bureau of Ventura*
Marty Miller - *Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing*
Kendra Moesle - *Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs*
Eddi Occampo - *Self Help Enterprises*
Ana Padilla - *UC Merced*
Sara Patino - *UC Merced*
Heather Riden - *UC Davis*
Jacob Rogers - *South East Non-Profit Housing*
Self Help Housing Participants - *Self Help Housing Enterprises Family*
Ken Triugueiro - *Peoples Self Help Housing Corporation*
Alan Vera
Gabrielle Vignone - *House Farm Workers*
Agricultural Community's Water Treatment Team

CONTENTS

What We Know, What We Don't Know, and a Plan to Better Understand Housing Options and Access for Agricultural Workers 1

Executive Summary 5

Introduction 10

Demographic, Economic, AND POLICY Factors Affect Agricultural Workers' Access to Housing 12

- Agricultural Workers Face Significant Economic Vulnerability 15

Assessing the Agricultural Worker Housing Ecosystem: Approach and Guiding Framework 18

What We Currently Know About Agricultural Worker Housing at a National Level 22

- What We Know About Private Market Housing for Farmworkers 23
- What We Know About the Employer-Provided Housing Market for Agricultural Workers 27
- What We Know About Government-Supported Housing for Agricultural Workers 29

What We Need to Know: Assessing Agricultural Worker Housing Conditions 33

- Housing Ecosystem Assessment for a County & Community in California's Central Valley 35

Strategies, Solutions and Recommendations to Improve Housing Ecosystems for Agricultural Workers 50

APPENDIX: DATA, RESOURCES, AND METHODS 57

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.

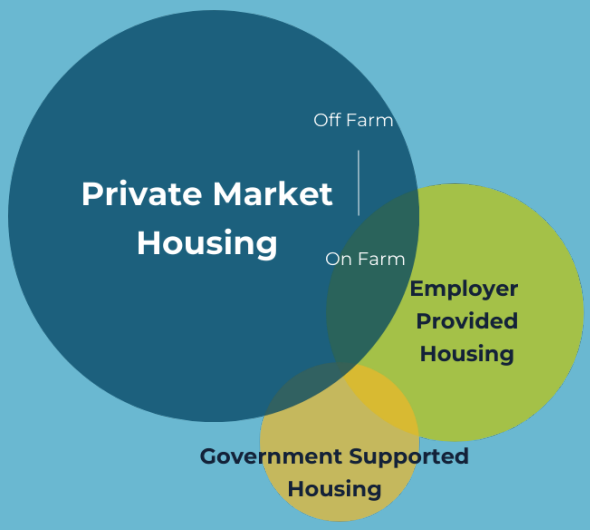
- Farmworkers are older, more experienced, and substantially less migratory than in previous decades; approximately 85 percent are now considered settled rather than migratory.
- More workers also live with their families in the United States, creating greater demand for stable, year-round housing rather 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.

Agricultural Worker Housing Ecosystem



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

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.

INTRODUCTION

Photo: Rory Doyle. There is More Work to be Done

U.S. agriculture depends on the labor of millions of workers who plant, cultivate, harvest, and process the crops that sustain households nationwide. From fruits and vegetables to dairy, meat, and staple commodities, these workers underpin a multibillion-dollar agricultural economy that supports domestic consumption and global trade. Yet despite their central role in national food security, public health, and economic stability, agricultural workers remain among the most economically vulnerable people in the country. Their wages, employment conditions, and housing circumstances often reflect longstanding asymmetries within the agricultural sector.

Despite the scale and importance of this workforce, comprehensive and current national data on agricultural workers, particularly for their housing conditions, remain limited. Federal datasets often prioritize production, employment certification, and wages, while offering little detail about living arrangements, housing quality, or access. Without quality and detailed information, policymakers,

practitioners, and the agricultural industry face blind spots in housing conditions and access for agricultural worker households.

In response to persistent data gaps and significant shifts in the agricultural labor force, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC), in partnership with UnidosUS, undertook research to better understand the housing conditions and dynamics facing agricultural workers. This research first (1) draws upon a combination of existing data and insights from national and community experts to help contextualize what is currently known about agricultural workers and their housing circumstances. Secondly, (2) but equally important, the report constructs a framework for assessing agricultural worker housing systems and needs across a hierarchy of communities and geographies. While this study is not intended to serve as a comprehensive national assessment, it is an advancement in the understanding of what we know about the housing of agricultural workers in a continually changing environment – both in the long-term and more immediate developments. This summary information is then followed by a construct to help inform "what we should know," and an approach to fill those knowledge gaps that will ultimately inform strategies and solutions for a stronger housing ecosystem for agricultural workers in the United States.

DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC, AND POLICY FACTORS AFFECT AGRICULTURAL WORKERS' ACCESS TO HOUSING

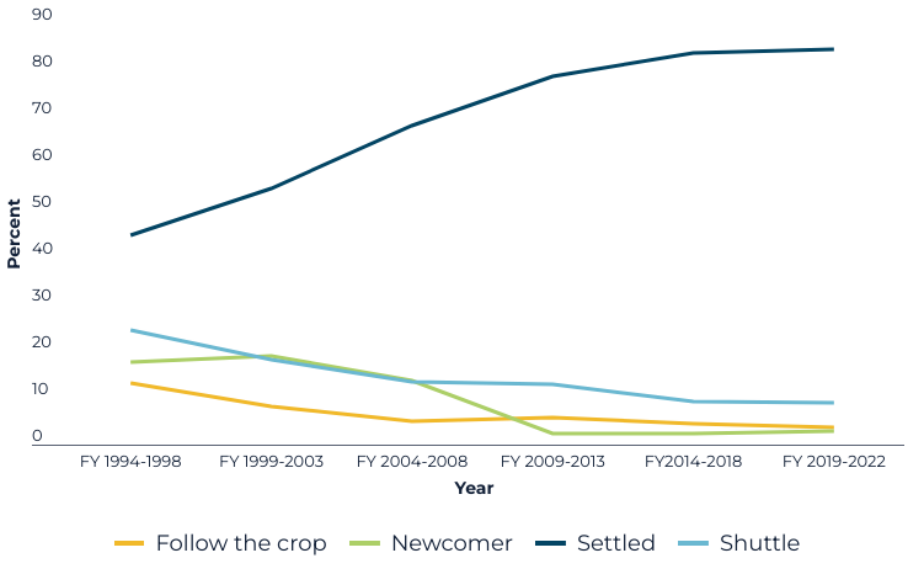
Photo: Jennifer Emerling. There is More Work to be Done

Understanding the housing circumstances of agricultural workers requires looking beyond the characteristics of individual homes to consider the broader systems, markets, and conditions that shape where and how workers live. Agricultural employment is distinguished by labor dynamics, geography, mobility, relatively low wages, and, for some workers, a direct connection between employment and housing. These unique conditions can create housing needs and experiences that differ substantially from those of the general population. An understanding of these broader economic, demographic, regulatory, and community conditions is integral in contextualizing pathways through which agricultural workers secure housing.

The Agricultural Workforce is Changing

Agricultural workers are less mobile than in previous decades. While the economy and mechanization have reduced the need for farm labor, crops are still largely harvested by hand, and a substantial number of agricultural jobs exist in the United States.[1] Traveling to a particular geographic area to harvest crops for a temporary period was more typical in past decades. Under this framework, migrant agricultural workers generally followed one of three migration streams: East, Midwest, and West. During winter months, migrant farmworkers typically resided in their home-base communities in California, Florida, Texas, Mexico, or other Central American and Caribbean nations. They traveled northward along the respective streams to perform farm work.[2] But due to a host of factors, agricultural workers are generally more settled and less mobile. In 1994 an estimated 55 percent of farmworkers operated in more migratory patterns of shuttling, following the crops or were newcomers. As of 2022, less than 16 percent of farmworkers were migratory, and over 85 percent were 'settled' in their work.[3]

Farmworker* Migration Status, 1994-2022



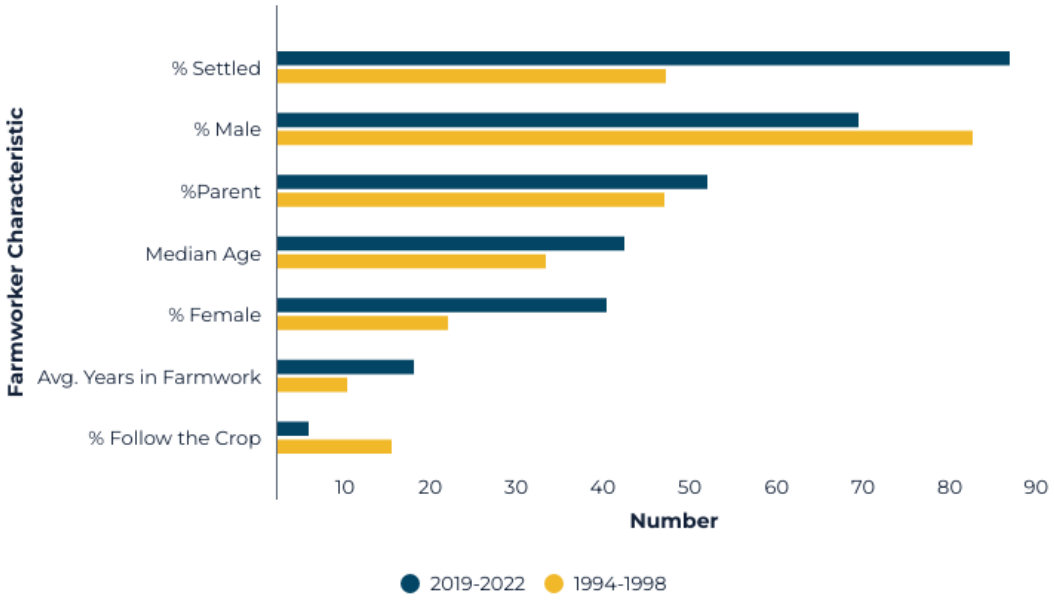
Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of the U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Worker's Survey 1994-2022. https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey/data To access an interactive version of this chart, visit https://infogram.com/1p6lej7jyqxg00a5gye5vgx2rgs3jqz670y **Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers.*

The agricultural workforce has aged and become more experienced. The median age of farm laborers has increased from 31 years in 1994 to 40 years in 2022.[4] Similarly, farmworkers reported an average of 15.8 years of farm labor experience in

2022 compared to an average of 8 years' experience in 1994.[5] A greater share of workers now also report working for a single employer throughout the year.

As migration patterns have changed, so have families and the household structures of farmworkers. The household composition of farmworkers has generally been stable over the past few decades with farm laborers reporting consistently high rates of marriage (55 percent - 60 percent) and having families. What has changed is that a much higher rates of farmworkers now live with their families in the United States.[6] In 2013-2014, approximately 25 percent of farmworker parents were living apart from all of their minor children or were 'unaccompanied' By 2020-2021 the rate of unaccompanied parents had been halved to approximately 12 percent.[7] While still a male dominated industry, the proportion of females in farmworker roles has also increased.

Farmworker* Characteristics, 1994-2022



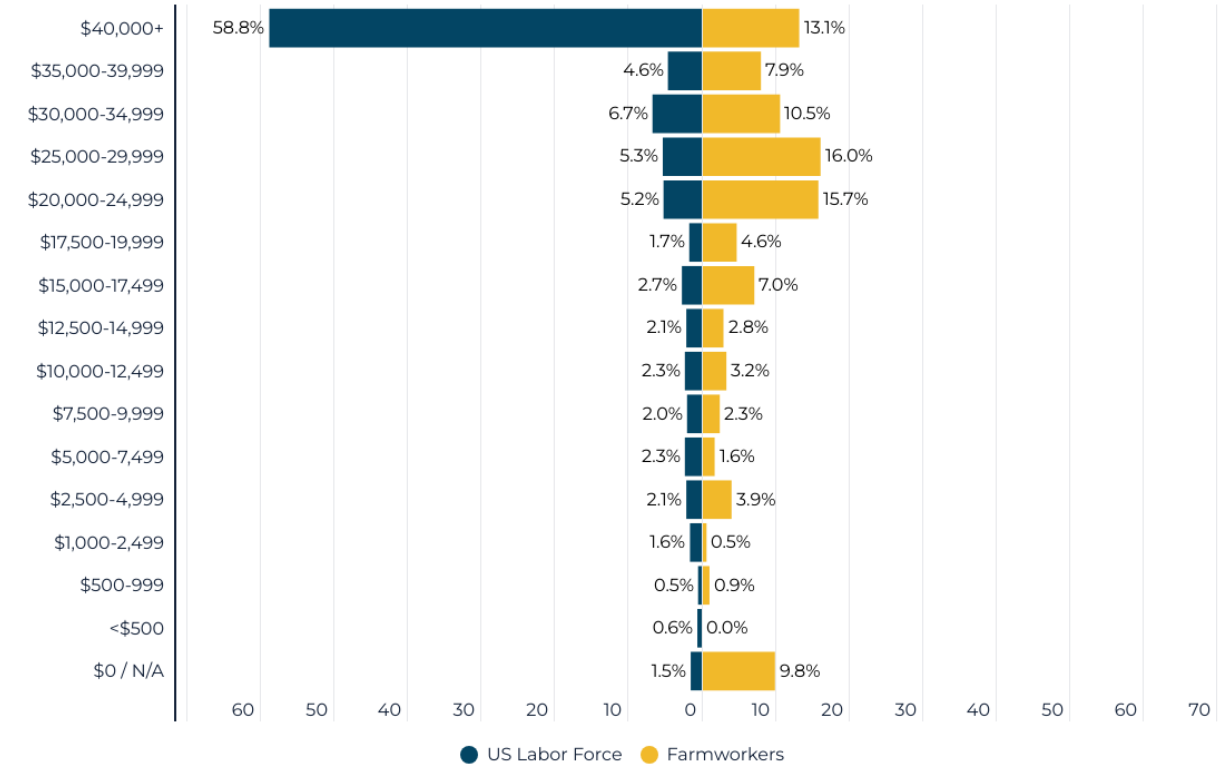
*Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of the U.S. Department of Labor's National Agricultural Worker's Survey 1994-2022. https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey/data To access an interactive version of this chart, visit https://infogram.com/1pn9pvmkzzkj97iz7vrmeyexz3am36wdxv1 *Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers.*

These demographic and structural shifts have important implications for housing. A more settled workforce requires stable, year-round housing options rather than more seasonal or temporary arrangements. The growth of family households increases demand for larger homes, access to schools, and integration into local communities.

Agricultural Workers Face Significant Economic Vulnerability

Agricultural labor remains among the lowest-paid employment sectors in the United States. More than half of farmworkers earn less than $30,000 compared to just over one-quarter of individual earners in all employment sectors.[8] A substantial share of agricultural worker households have incomes below the federal poverty line. An estimated 20 percent[9] of farmworker households had incomes below the poverty threshold in 2022 compared to 12 percent of all households nationally.[10] While wages among farmworkers have increased in recent years, they remain well below national averages for all sectors.

Farmworker* and US Labor Force Incomes, 2021-2022



Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of the U.S Department of Labor NAWS 2021-2022 data and American Community Survey 2021-2022 population estimates.
*To access an interactive version of this chart, visit https://infogram.com/ag-poverty-line-1h7v4pdq5qdwj4k *Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers.*

Policy and Cultural Considerations

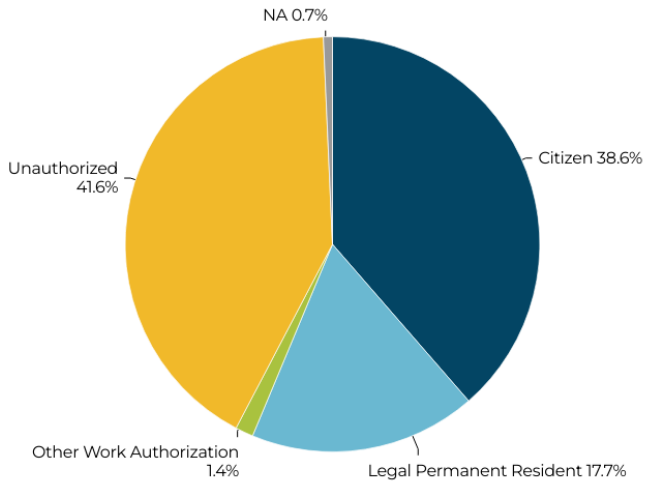
Farm labor occupies a unique place in U.S. history, shaped by longstanding dynamics between the economic importance of agricultural production and the marginalization of the workforce that sustains it. The history of agricultural labor in the United States is deeply intertwined with immigration, migration, race, economic hardship, and the experiences of populations that have often occupied the margins of the nation's labor market. For generations, agricultural production and food processing depended on workers willing – or compelled by limited economic alternatives – to perform physically demanding, seasonal, and often low-wage work. The people filling these jobs have changed over time. Yet a consistent feature of the agricultural labor system has been its reliance on workers with relatively limited economic and political power.

This history extends beyond current patterns of immigration and is also highly regional, reflecting distinct systems of labor recruitment, land ownership, and racial inequality across the country. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, agricultural production drew heavily on enslaved and formerly enslaved Black workers and sharecroppers in the South, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, and other immigrant laborers, particularly in the West. Domestic migration was also important. During the Great Depression and Dust Bowl of the 1930s, severe drought, farm failures, and economic displacement pushed hundreds of thousands of people from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and other parts of the Great Plains and South toward agricultural regions in California and elsewhere. More recently the Bracero Program (1942-1964), brought millions of Mexican workers to fill wartime labor shortages while exposing them to widespread exploitation and inadequate living conditions.[11]

Today's debates over migrant labor, immigration policies and tactics, and industry responses have been shaped by recurring concerns over labor rights, working conditions, and uncertainties.[12] These historical dynamics continue to influence cultural perceptions, policy responses, and housing outcomes for agricultural workers.

Immigration and documentation uncertainty heighten instability for agricultural workers. Agricultural workers and their families are navigating a period of heightened uncertainty surrounding immigration status, documentation requirements, and immigration enforcement. Because the agricultural workforce includes U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, workers with temporary or employment-based authorization, individuals in mixed-status families, and workers who may lack current authorization, immigration concerns do not affect all workers the same way. Approximately six in ten hired crop farmworkers are U.S. citizens or otherwise legally authorized to work in the United States, while roughly four in ten lack work authorization.

Farmworker* Authorization Status, 2021-2022



*Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of U.S Department of Labor NAWS 2021-2022 data. To access an interactive version of this chart, visit https://infogram.com/naws-documentation-status-1h0r6rzqd8e3l4e *Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers.*

This uncertainty can have consequences that extend beyond immigration status itself and influence the everyday economic and housing circumstances of agricultural workers. Fear of enforcement or unwanted scrutiny may make some workers less willing to report unsafe or substandard housing conditions, challenge unlawful employment practices, seek public or nonprofit assistance, or provide personal information when accessing housing and services. For workers living in employer-provided housing, immigration and employment concerns can be particularly intertwined because the loss of a job may also threaten the loss of housing. Mixed-status households may face additional pressures as family members weigh the potential risks of seeking assistance against the immediate needs of children and other household members.

These dynamics also make agricultural workers an especially difficult population to reach and accurately assess through conventional data collection and community engagement. Reluctance to participate in surveys, interviews, or government programs can contribute to undercounting and obscure the extent of housing, economic, and service needs within agricultural worker communities. As a result, immigration-related uncertainty should be understood not only as a legal or employment issue, but also as an important contextual factor shaping housing stability, household decision-making, access to services, and the willingness of agricultural workers to engage with institutions who can assist them.

ASSESSING THE AGRICULTURAL WORKER HOUSING ECOSYSTEM: APPROACH AND GUIDING FRAMEWORK

Photo: Jennifer Emerling. There is More Work to be Done

This report integrates data analysis, stakeholder interviews, and a community housing market assessment to examine the structure, supply, and issues of housing provision among agricultural workers. The analysis also seeks to organize what is currently known about agricultural worker housing, identify the major gaps in existing knowledge, and outline data, information, policies, strategies, and solutions needed to better align housing systems with the realities of today's agricultural workforce.

The study was guided by three central questions:

1. *What types of housing are available to agricultural workers, and how do they access these options in local housing markets?*
2. *What structural, economic, and policy factors shape both the availability and quality of housing across regions and agricultural worker populations?*

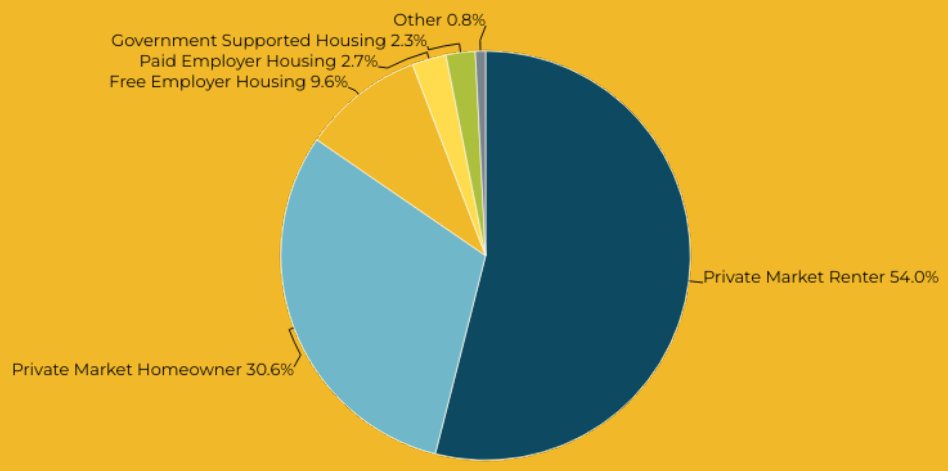
3. *How can the housing conditions and needs of agricultural workers be more accurately assessed at the national, regional, and community level?*

This research has two primary objectives. First, it draws on existing data and insights from national and community experts to contextualize what is currently known about agricultural workers and their housing circumstances. Second, it establishes a framework for assessing agricultural worker housing systems and needs across communities and geographies.

The study advances understanding of agricultural worker housing within a continually evolving economic, demographic, and policy environment. Building from what we know," the research identifies "what we should know" and offers an approach for addressing critical knowledge gaps – ultimately helping inform strategies and solutions for a stronger, more responsive housing ecosystem for agricultural workers.

Agricultural workers obtain housing through a complex network of private, employer-assisted, and publicly supported arrangements. No single housing sector is capable of meeting the full range of workers' needs, and the availability, affordability, and quality of housing often varies considerably across regions, agricultural industries, and worker populations. According to the NAWS, the majority of farmworkers (85 percent) obtain housing through the private market, while smaller shares rely on employer-provided (12 percent) or publicly assisted housing (2 percent). The distribution of housing arrangements reflects the broader dynamics facing agricultural worker housing systems, including a shortage of affordable homes, increasing competition for rural housing, and the difficulty of matching housing resources with the varying characteristics and demands of the agricultural workforce.

Farmworker* Housing Ecosystem, 2020-2022

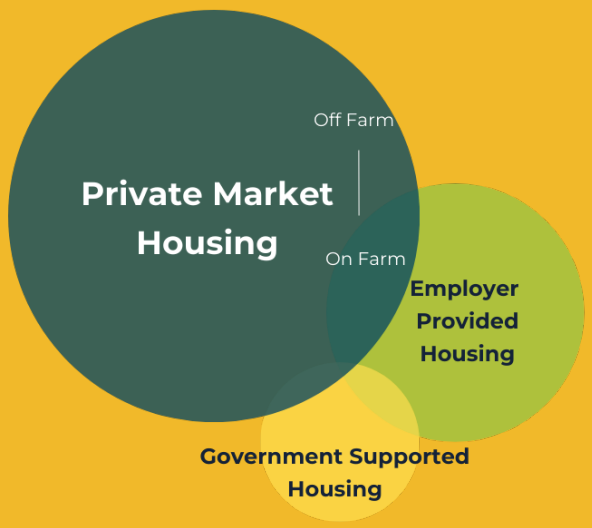


*Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of the U.S. Department of Labor 2020-2022 NAWS data * Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers*
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit
https://infogram.com/naws-housing-ecosystem-2020-2022-1hnp27ej1xjkn4g

Private Market Housing

Consistent with housing markets generally, the vast majority of agricultural workers secure housing through the private market, either as renters or homeowners. Unlike employer-provided or government-supported housing, private-market housing is generally not tied directly to agricultural employment or participation in a specific housing program, providing workers with greater independence in where and how they live. At the same time, agricultural workers may encounter barriers in the private market, including low incomes, seasonal employment, limited rental availability, rising housing costs, documentation or screening requirements, and competition for an already constrained supply of affordable housing. These challenges can be especially pronounced in rural and agricultural communities.

Agricultural Worker Housing Ecosystem



Employer-Provided and H-2A Visa Housing

Unlike most industries, agriculture has a long-standing, albeit declining, reliance on employer-provided housing, reflecting the seasonal, migratory, and often remote nature of the agricultural workforce. Unlike conventional housing secured through the private market, employer-provided housing is directly linked to employment, offering workers immediate access to accommodations located near farms, ranches, orchards, and other agricultural operations. These housing arrangements can range from temporary labor camps and dormitory-style facilities for seasonal workers to single-family homes, apartments, and manufactured housing provided for year-round employees.

While traditional employer-provided housing for agricultural workers has generally declined over the past few decades, the dramatic increase of and reliance on the U.S. Department of Labor's H-2A visa program for the agricultural workforce is refocusing attention and resources on employer provided housing. Under the H-2A Visa program, employers are required to provide housing for visa holders.

Government-Supported Housing

Federal, state, and local governments have had a role nationally in housing provision for the past century. The federal government's involvement in affordable housing is a complex patchwork of programs, subsidies, tax incentives, and direct homeownership lending. The structure, access, and delivery of public housing investment for agricultural workers is relatively small. Roughly two percent of agricultural workers are estimated to access publicly supported housing.[13] At the same time, government sponsored housing occupies a critical space in the agricultural worker housing spectrum. In many farmworker communities, government-supported housing is among the highest quality and most affordable housing options available because they meet basic housing quality and affordability requirements.

Together, these three housing pathways (private market, employer provided, and government supported) form an overlapping, yet fragmented and often inadequate system for farm laborers. While there are obvious variations, this general framework serves as a model to illustrate the housing ecosystem for agricultural workers and a platform to improve critical data and knowledge gaps that will help inform strategies and solutions.

For more detailed information on the data, methods, and analysis for this report please consult the Appendix: About the Data.

WHAT WE CURRENTLY KNOW ABOUT AGRICULTURAL WORKER HOUSING AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

Photo: Jennifer Emerling. There is More Work to be Done

Agricultural workers rely on a diverse and often fragmented housing system that spans the private market, employer-provided accommodations, and a range of government-supported housing resources. Each of these housing sources serves a distinct role in meeting workers' needs, yet each is shaped by its own financing mechanisms, regulatory requirements, availability, and challenges. Despite the scale and importance of the agricultural workforce, comprehensive and current national data on agricultural workers, particularly their housing conditions, remain limited. This chapter examines what we currently know about the housing characteristics and options available to agricultural workers at the national level within the rubric of varied markets and housing resources through existing data and information.

What We Know About Private Market Housing for Farmworkers

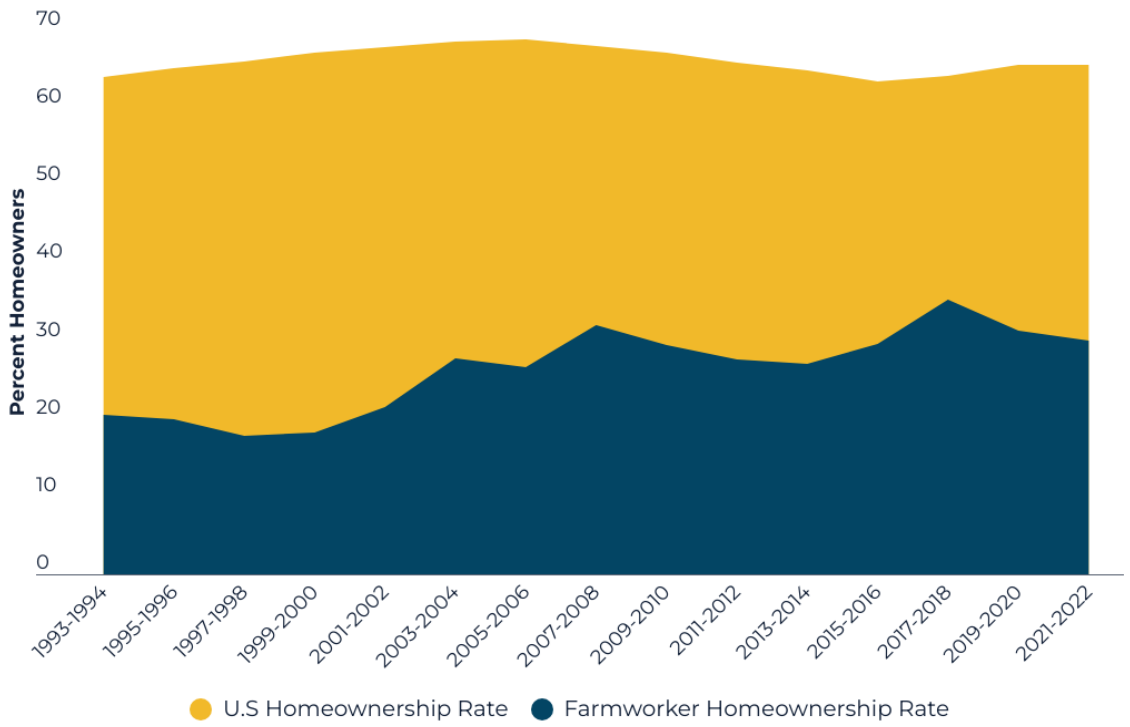
For most agricultural workers and their families housing is secured through the same private-market channels available to other households, including rental apartments, single-family rental homes, manufactured or mobile homes, and owner-occupied housing.

Much of the available data, analysis, and information on farmworkers' experiences in the private housing market comes from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS). Administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, NAWS is an employment-based, random survey that collects information on the demographic, employment, and socioeconomic characteristics of the U.S. crop labor force. One of the key advantages of NAWS is its long-running and nationally representative design, which allows researchers and policymakers to track trends in the agricultural workforce over time. In the absence of more comprehensive national data sources, NAWS remains one of the few datasets that provides consistent information related to farmworker living arrangements and housing circumstances.

At the same time, NAWS has important limitations. The survey primarily focuses on employment and worker characteristics rather than housing quality, affordability, or physical conditions, resulting in only limited information about workers' housing experiences. In addition, NAWS samples field workers employed in crop agriculture and does not capture the full range of agricultural laborers, such as many livestock, dairy, forestry, aquaculture, and other farm-related workers. Consequently, the findings presented by NAWS reflect the circumstances of field workers rather than the broader agricultural workforce. For this reason, the term *farmworkers* is used throughout this section to refer specifically to the field-worker population represented in NAWS, unless otherwise noted.

While most farmworkers in the private market rent, farmworkers own homes at higher rates than ever before. The United States is largely a nation of homeowners and homeownership is more prevalent in rural areas. In farmworker communities, as in the rest of the country, rental housing is also essential because many households working in the agricultural sector cannot or choose not to own a home.

Farmworker* Homeownership Rate, 1993-2022

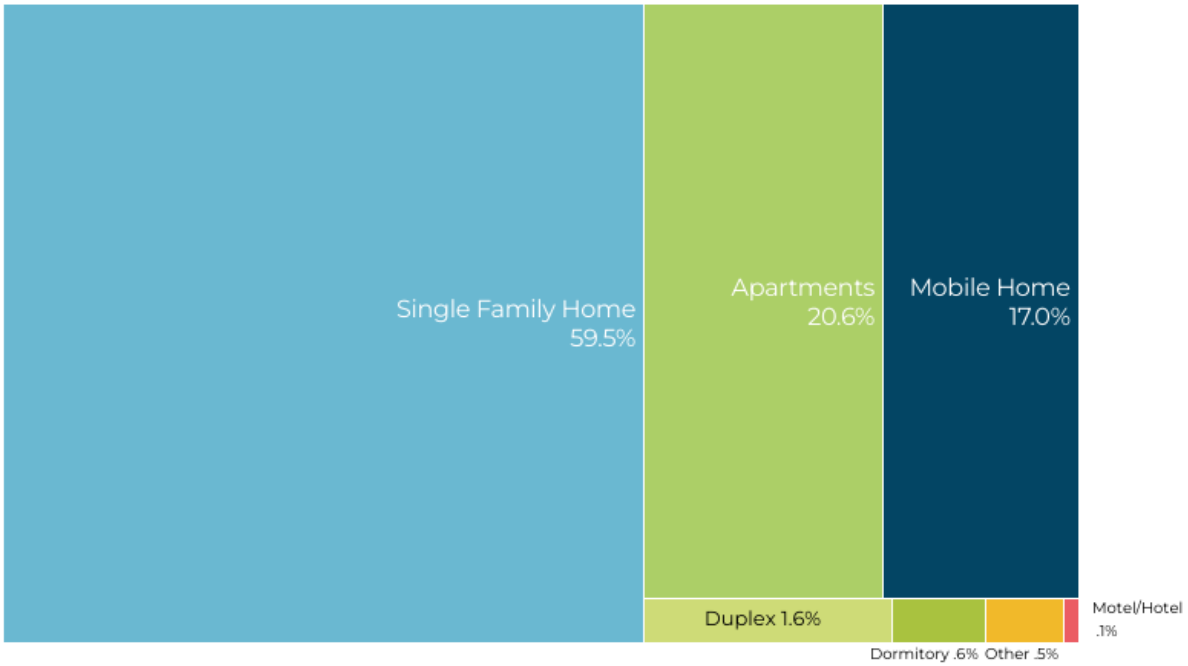


Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAW)s and U.S. Census Bureau's Housing Vacancies and Homeownership (CPS-HVS) data https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/index.html
** Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers.*
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit:
https://infogram.com/1pxxq7y7pemee9hqmn7xw1d5rgtn0rwk7gz

Around thirty percent of farmworkers reported owning a home or manufactured home in the United States, compared to nearly two-thirds of all households in the United States. Additionally, an estimated 35 percent of farmworkers are estimated to own a home in another country.

Farmworkers access a wide range of housing types in the private market, reflecting both the diversity of agricultural employment arrangements and the availability of affordable housing in many rural communities. Most farmworkers live in conventional single-family homes, manufactured or mobile homes, duplexes, apartments, and other multifamily rental properties. Seasonal and migrant workers may also reside in employer-provided housing, which can include barracks-style accommodations, dormitories, labor camps, converted motels, or other shared living facilities.

Farmworker* Occupied Housing Structures, 2017-2018



Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of the U.S. Department of Labor 2017-2018 NAWS data
** Farmworker estimate only, does not include dairy or processing workers.*
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit:
https://infogram.com/1pmj37dnrkx3pvs3nlp2w6q0ndfzr9knx17

Household crowding remains one of the most common and enduring housing challenges among farmworkers. Research consistently indicates that farmworker households experience crowding at rates significantly higher than the general population, often due to limited affordable housing options, low incomes, and the need to share housing with extended family members or multiple households.[14] NAWS estimates place the rate of crowding (more than one person per room) among agricultural workers at 22 percent in 2021-2022, compared to 3.4 percent among all U.S. households. Service providers and stakeholders frequently stated that the extent of crowding is likely undercounted because many farmworkers view shared living arrangements as a normal or necessary aspect of daily life and may not identify their housing conditions as overcrowded when surveyed.[15] As a result, conventional data collection may underestimate the prevalence of crowding and the housing pressures experienced by farmworker families and communities.

Housing affordability is another persistent challenge facing farmworkers. Agricultural work is generally characterized by low wages, seasonal employment, and fluctuating work hours. These dynamics can make it difficult for workers and their families to secure stable, quality housing. Although most farmworkers are paid at or above the applicable minimum wage, earnings often remain insufficient to meet local housing costs.

Farmworker housing costs vary considerably depending on the type of housing arrangement. Farmworkers compete for limited affordable housing in rural communities. According to the 2021–2022 NAWS, 61 percent of farmworkers pay $600 or more per month for housing, excluding utility costs. For workers with low and often variable incomes, these expenses can consume a substantial share of household earnings. A significant limitation in NAWS data is the inability to calculate or derive "housing cost burden" estimates (the percentage of monthly household income that goes towards housing costs) which are a standard and important indicator in most housing analyses and assessments.

The shift away from migrant labor toward a year-round workforce and the transition of field workers into other industries has added pressure on housing availability. The decrease in farmworker mobility has affected the cultural diversity and economic development of the communities in which they live while also adding to the strain on housing. As the temporary visa workforce increases, so does the responsibility of the employer to provide free and regulated housing either on-site or within nearby communities. As these trends continue and expand, added stress is placed on rural communities already dealing with inadequate housing stock and availability.[16]

The condition of basic housing amenities remains an important but understudied aspect of farmworker housing quality. Assessing housing quality - even for the overall U.S. housing stock – can be challenging. Many of the tools available to measure housing conditions nationally and regionally are limited and often only provide a proxy for extremely substandard housing. It is often difficult to measure detailed housing conditions and gradients of habitability or quality given the standard data resources available. These data and information gaps on housing quality are even more severe for agricultural workers given their often-unique characteristics, dynamics, and lack of visibility.

While relatively few farmworkers report a complete lack of kitchen or bathroom facilities, access to these amenities does not necessarily indicate that they are adequate, functional, or in good repair. Since 2009, NAWS has tracked the presence of kitchens and bathrooms in farmworker housing and has consistently estimated that less than 2 percent of farmworker households lack these facilities entirely. NAWS 2021-2022 data suggest that access to these basic amenities is relatively consistent across migrant and non-migrant workers. Among non-migrant farmworkers, 0.5 percent reported living in housing without a kitchen and 0.1 percent reported having no bathroom, compared to migrant farmworkers at 0.3 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively.[17] However, few national data sources assess the quality, functionality, or condition of kitchens, bathrooms, plumbing, and other essential household infrastructure.[18] Recent federal policy changes may further complicate efforts to understand housing conditions by removing longstanding procedures for coordination among federal agencies responsible for farmworker related enforcement activities, potentially limiting the consistency of oversight and information sharing over time.[19] Practitioner and expert interviews indicated that the

condition of these facilities remains largely unknown.[20] Even when housing technically includes kitchens and bathrooms, farmworkers may contend with broken fixtures, inadequate maintenance, overcrowded use, or other deficiencies that affect health, safety, and quality of life.

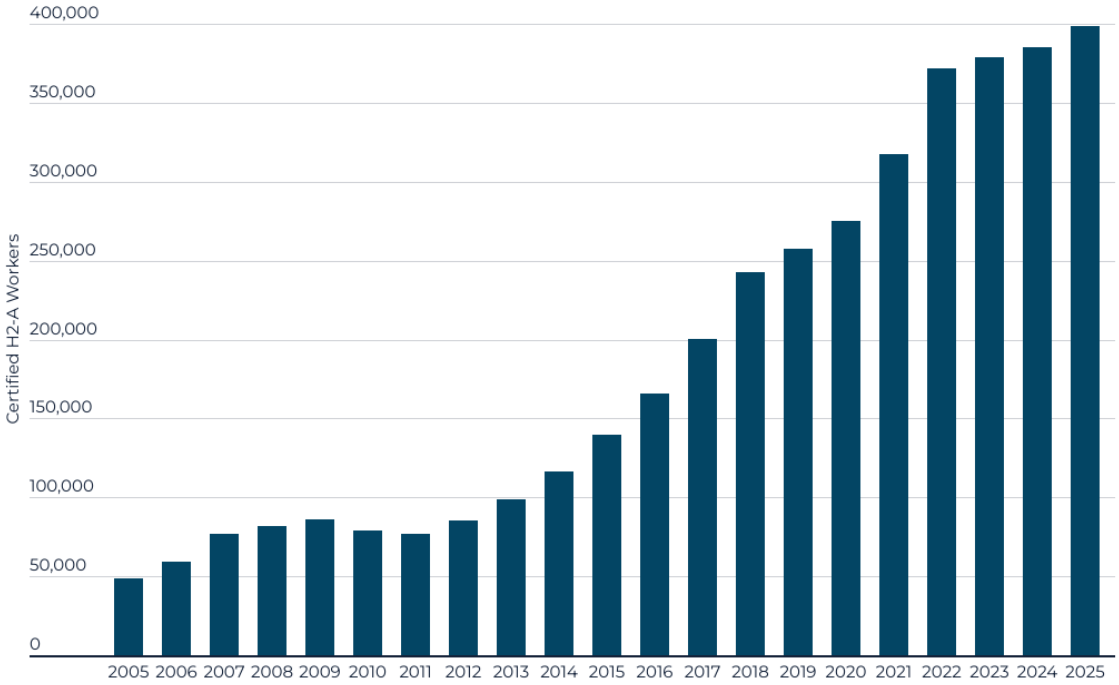
What We Know About the Employer-Provided Housing Market for Agricultural Workers

Employer-provided housing represents a distinct and important component of the agricultural worker housing ecosystem, particularly for seasonal, migrant, and temporary workers whose employment may require them to relocate frequently or live near agricultural operations. By locating housing close to farms and worksites, employer-provided housing can help address the challenges of finding affordable, available housing within reasonable distance of often remote and geographically dispersed places of employment. At the same time, employer-provided housing creates a unique relationship between employment and housing stability.

An estimated 10 percent of agricultural worker housing units are employer-owned. The prevalence of employer-owned housing has declined markedly since the mid-1990s when nearly 30 percent of field worker homes were owned by the employer. Some employers still prioritize providing housing to ensure and motivate workers to return after the off-season.[21] Employer-provided housing may be regulated to some degree for health and safety to protect workers. Employer-owned housing is not without problems, however. A situation with an employer as a landlord may compound an already asymmetric relationship. When a worker's job, housing, and sometimes transportation is provided by the same employer, the loss or disruption of employment can also jeopardize the worker's place to live. Some agricultural workers may be uncomfortable complaining or making suggestions regarding housing to their employer.[22] Increasingly, regulations combined with the costs of administration and maintenance of housing have dissuaded many growers from providing housing to workers.[23]

Expansion of the H-2A program is reshaping labor and housing dynamics. The agricultural guest worker or “H-2A” visa program has grown substantially since its inception and approximately 384,000 H-2A visas are now issued annually.[24] The temporary foreign agricultural worker program allows agricultural employers to hire workers from other countries with temporary work permits to fill agricultural jobs for less than one year.[25] The temporary work visas can only be issued once an employer documents a labor shortage of U.S. citizens who are unwilling or unable to perform the task.[26] Under the program, employers must compensate workers with prevailing wages and guarantee minimum work hours.

Certified H-2A Visas, 2005-2025



Source: HAC tabulations of U.S. DOL's Employment and Training Administration Disclosure Data (FY2005-FY2025)
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit:
https://infogram.com/1py1mr7lynjejgi3y9nqg2xpnesy76krg6q

The H-2A program requires employers to provide free housing and transportation or pay for workers' housing and travel costs. Additionally, the housing must be inspected and certified in advance to ensure that it complies with applicable health and safety standards. [27] While these obligations are intended to promote the safety and well-being of guest workers, abuses of the program and employees have been reported.[28, 29]

The average H-2A worker is in the United States for around six months.[30] H-2A workers are estimated to comprise 11 percent of U.S. crop agriculture's 1.1 million full-time employment (FTE) jobs. Over half of the H-2A jobs are distributed among five states, California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Washington.[31] In 2018, only 3 percent of H-2A workers were female, and the majority of visa holders are between the ages of 25 and 29.[32]

The remote and rural nature of many facilities housing H-2A workers contributes to unique dynamics between employers and visa holders. In 38 states, there is no regulation of farmworker housing or a dedicated agency to perform the required inspections. In addition, states that do have housing inspection systems in place are often under-resourced. For example, the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) had $30,000 budgeted per two years. This minimal

oversight was likely a contributing factor to TDHCA's lack of enforcement against operators of failed inspections where 9 out of 10 migrant agricultural workers did not reside in licensed housing.[33]

With the considerable growth in workforce visas, competition for housing options, which are scarce in many communities, has grown between guest visa holders and non-H-2A farmworkers.[34]

There are longstanding advantages and disadvantages inherent to employer provided housing. In many rural areas where affordable rental housing is scarce or unavailable, employer-provided housing fills an essential gap by enabling producers to recruit and retain a stable workforce while reducing transportation barriers and supporting time-sensitive agricultural activities. At the same time, the close relationship between housing and employment presents unique challenges, including concerns regarding housing quality, worker protections, affordability, regulatory oversight, and the vulnerability of workers who may lose both their employment and housing simultaneously. As a result, employer-provided housing occupies a distinct and important position within the broader agricultural housing landscape, serving as both a workforce necessity and a critical area of housing and labor policy.

What We Know About Government-Supported Housing for Agricultural Workers

Government-supported housing provides another critical component of the agricultural worker housing ecosystem. Public programs and resources help address affordability, availability, and housing-quality challenges that private-market and employer-provided housing alone may not adequately provide. Federal, state, and local programs support agricultural worker housing through a variety of mechanisms, including subsidized rental developments, grants and loans for the construction or rehabilitation of farm labor housing, rental assistance, and other affordable housing resources available to income-eligible agricultural workers and their families. These investments can be especially important in rural and agricultural communities where low agricultural wages intersect with limited housing production, aging housing stocks, and shortages of rental housing.

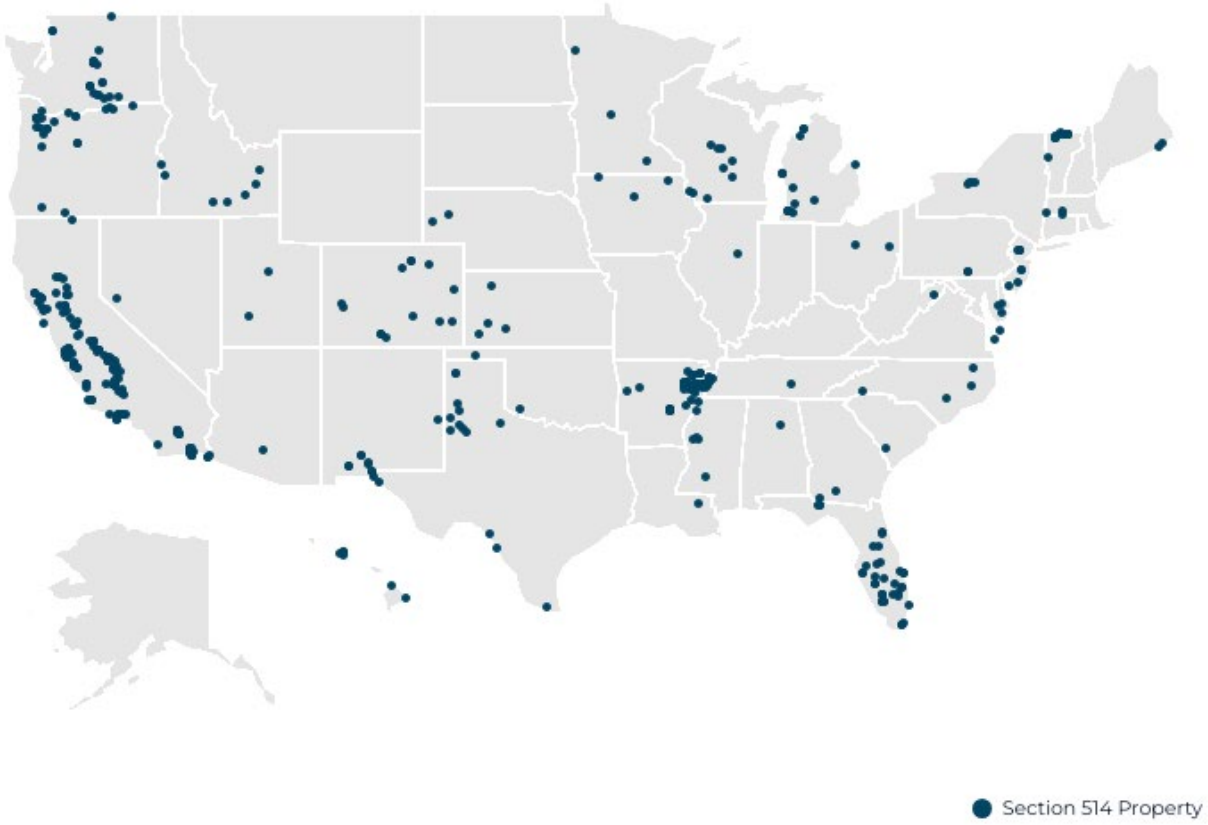
USDA has long-provided a key resource for farm labor housing. Federally subsidized rental housing for agricultural workers can be financed through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Section 514/516 loans and grants for purchase, construction, or and repair. Section 514 lending serves as the primary source of direct financing for employers seeking to develop on-farm housing for agricultural workers, as well as for eligible nonprofit organizations developing farm labor housing. The complimentary Section 516 program provides grant funding to eligible nonprofit and public entities, helping reduce development costs and preserve the long-term

affordability of farmworker housing. The Section 514/516 program helps alleviate some of the barriers farmworkers face in finding safe, decent housing, such as the lack of affordable rental housing and the inability to sign a full-year lease.

USDA's Section 514 portfolio currently includes nearly 450 properties containing more than 16,870 homes for agricultural workers across the United States. While an important source of affordable housing for residents, this program provides a comparatively small proportion of housing relative to the overall market for agricultural workers.

According to the most recent data from USDA, over 43,000 residents reside in Section 514 apartments and households have an average annual income of just over $31,000.[35] Importantly, USDA Section 514 farm labor housing is a highly affordable housing resource as less than one percent of Section 514 households are "rent overburdened."[36]

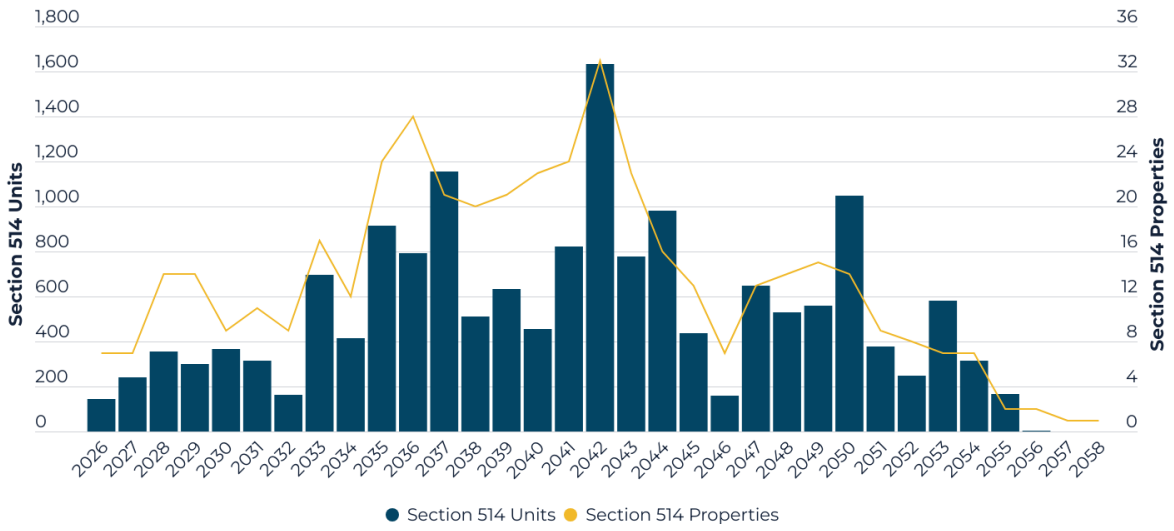
USDA Section 514 Properties, March 2026



Source: HAC tabulations of USDA Section 514 data.

While some new Section 514 homes are being developed, they are not keeping pace with departures from the portfolio. The program finances less than 1,000 new units per year, on average.[37] Despite moderate increases in overall funding throughout the years, the development of new units of Section 514 Farm Labor Housing has been steadily dropping. The overall percentage decrease in properties between the years 2017 and 2024 is 16.6 percent. This decrease in housing unit development may be due partially to the fact that program funding has not kept pace with rising development and construction costs and inflation. This decline culminates in an aging housing stock with the majority of units over 25 years old.[38] While estimates do not account for the creation of new agricultural worker housing, the current stock of homes in USDA's Section 514 portfolio is expected to be entirely depleted by 2058.

USDA Section 514 Estimated Annual Exits, 2026-2058



Source: Housing Assistance Council tabulations of data published by the USDA on the Section 515 Program.
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit: https://infogram.com/state-515-exit-estimate-chart-1hnp27ejoyddn4g

USDA is not the only federally subsidized housing program that supports agricultural workers. Important rental programs including USDA Section 515 Multifamily Housing, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), and HUD's Housing Choice Vouchers and USDA Section 502 Direct Loan, USDA Section 523 Self-Help Housing, and HUD Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program (SHOP) also make it possible for agricultural families to access both affordable rental and homeownership housing opportunities.

An Important Note on Housing Markets for Agricultural Workers! *This study and assessment model is grounded in the concept that agricultural workers access their housing through one of three primary market channels (e.g. private market, employer provided market, and government supported market). While there is substantial evidence and rationale to support this construct, it is important to note that these housing markets are not always mutually exclusive.*

For example, H-2A visa required housing is considered 'employer provided housing' in this model, but in many instances, H-2A visa sponsors are likely securing housing from within the private market for their employees. Similarly, H-2A visa sponsors are now technically able to house their workers in USDA Section 514 farm labor housing, a government supported resource.

While the researchers of this study believe the underlying market model to be strong, it is important to remember that cross-sector housing occurs in any housing market regardless of occupant type.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW: ASSESSING AGRICULTURAL WORKER HOUSING CONDITIONS

Photo: Manda LaPorte

Agricultural communities across the United States often share common economic, demographic, and housing characteristics shaped by their labor markets, rural geography, and proximity to agricultural land or production facilities. But as demonstrated in this, and other reports, current national data on agricultural workers, particularly their housing conditions, remain limited.

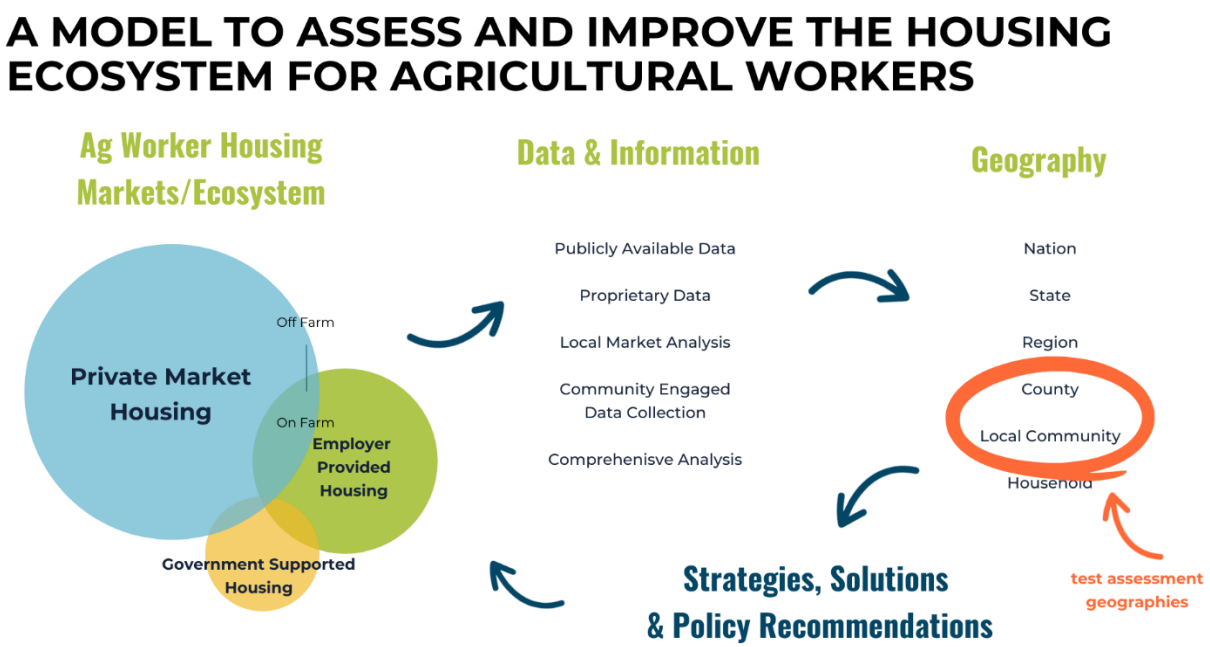
To address these data gaps and blind spots, and provide more localized assessments of agricultural worker housing, the research tested a data collection and analysis model on a community in California's Central Valley. Agricultural workers and communities are located across the nation. The researchers chose this community because of its location in the heart of 'America's Breadbasket' where agriculture represents a substantial portion of the communities' industry, society and culture.

While the test assessment area was chosen for its connection to and prevalence of agricultural activity, the analysis could be applied to an area at nearly any geographic scale with a multifaceted approach that allows for a degree of customization.

The model was tested at two geographic levels (a county and a specific community within that county) through an initial housing market assessment.

Overall, the model sought to illuminate:

- The condition and availability of housing opportunities for agricultural workers.
- The role of each supply market (private market, employer-provided, and government supported) for agricultural workers in the community.
- Housing conditions including availability, access, quality, affordability, crowding, and stability.
- Factors, conditions, or issues particularly important to the housing and living conditions for agricultural workers in their respective communities.
- The efficacy of the test assessment model including data sources and collection, analysis and synthesis, and limitations of components.



Housing Ecosystem Assessment for a County & Community in California's Central Valley

Photo: Manda LaPorte

The first element of the test assessment focuses on a county in California's Central Valley region. This particular county is located in one of the nation's most productive agricultural regions, where a diverse agricultural sector, and related industries shape local employment and housing demand. The county has a population of approximately 290,000 residents living in 91,000 households. Of this population, the test assessment identified an estimated 10,700 agricultural workers residing in 7,700 households.

Counties or communities with similar agricultural economies often experience housing pressures, including limited housing supply, affordability challenges, and aging infrastructure. The challenges faced by this county are deeply shaped by its relationship with the agricultural industry. As a result, they are also dynamic, reflecting significant sectoral changes in recent years. Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing effective housing strategies. This section offers a novel approach to measuring private market housing conditions using granular household-level data from the U.S Census Bureau's Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS), which allows holistic, flexible, and easily comparable evaluations of housing

conditions, costs, and demographic characteristics. For ease of use and ability to link individuals with households, the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) from IPUMS USA was primarily used for data retrieval. We demonstrate how this approach fills a gap in the collection of tools and approaches being used to measure and understand private, public, and employer-provided housing markets for agricultural workers.

PUMS ACS Data is a valuable tool for measuring housing markets. The Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS) harmonizes individual and household-level records from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and other censuses and surveys. Rather than publishing only aggregate estimates for a place, PUMS provides anonymized microdata records that allow researchers to define a population of interest and examine how worker, household, and housing characteristics intersect. Records are organized hierarchically: household records contain characteristics such as tenure, rent, mortgage costs, utilities, household income, structure type, and number of rooms, while person records contain characteristics such as age, occupation, industry, income, nativity, citizenship, and mobility. Individual records can be linked to the household in which they live, allowing the analysis to identify agricultural workers and then study the housing characteristics and conditions of their entire household.

This assessment uses the 2020–2024 ACS five-year sample accessed through PUMS. Five-year pooled observations across the period improve precision for smaller populations and geographies. Importantly, the estimates should be interpreted as average conditions during 2020–2024 rather than as a point-in-time count. Survey weights and replicate weights are used to produce population estimates and account for sampling uncertainty. Geography is available at the Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) level, a Census-defined area with at least 100,000 residents. This section aggregates at the county level to better allow for comparison across data sources and measurement approaches. The Central Valley County consists of two PUMAS.

PUMS is valuable for this work because it is recent, publicly accessible, consistently structured, and sufficiently flexible to examine agricultural workers alongside comparable nonagricultural sector populations. It permits analysis of housing characteristics such as tenure, costs, crowding, household composition, income, mobility, and demographic characteristics within one integrated dataset. The same method can be replicated for other agricultural PUMAs, states, regions, or the nation, making it possible to compare case-study communities, identify recurring housing pressures, and track change across time periods.

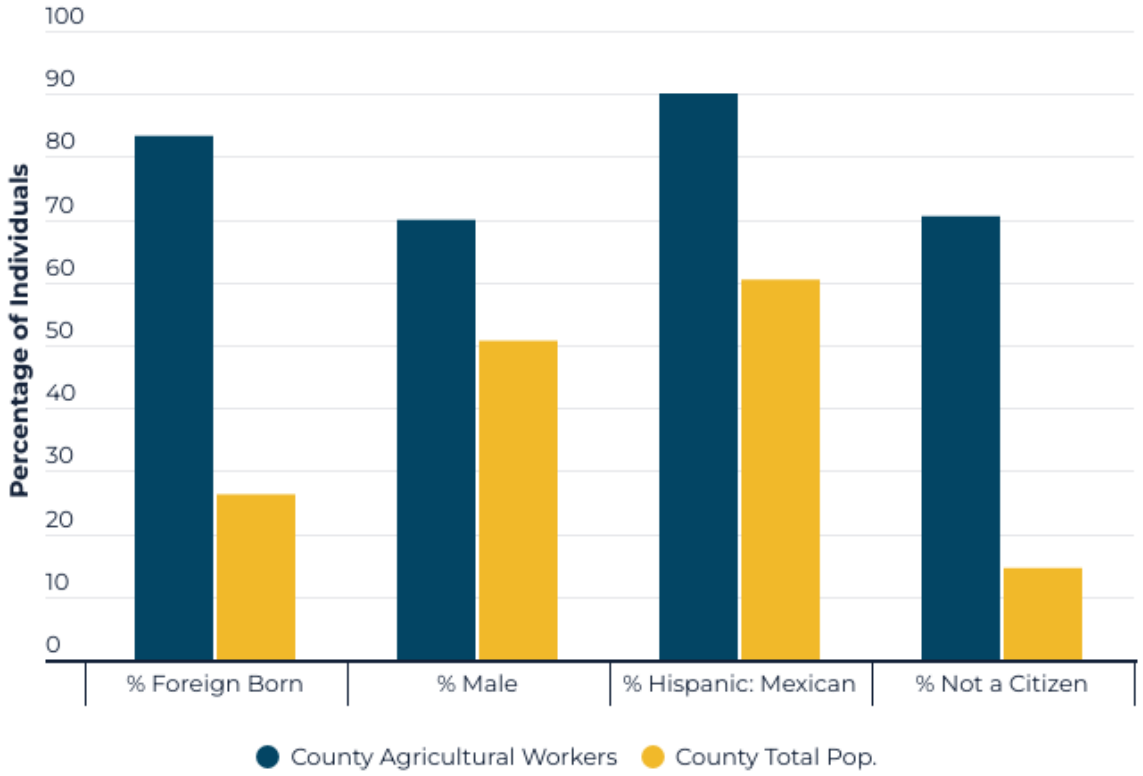
Private Market Housing Assessment at the County Level

As in all agricultural communities, social and economic factors influence housing access. PUMS estimates indicate that agricultural workers in the county are economically and demographically distinct from the county population. The

median agricultural worker is approximately 45 years old, works year-round, and earns about $25,734 in annual personal income. The median family income of agricultural workers in this county was approximately $63,764. About 83 percent of agricultural workers in this county were foreign born, 90 percent were of Mexican heritage, and approximately 71 percent were not U.S. citizens. These characteristics are relevant to housing access because low or variable earnings, documentation requirements, language barriers, and potential reluctance to interact with public institutions can restrict access to conventional rental, mortgage, and government supported housing systems.

Agricultural Worker vs. County Comparison

Population proportion comparison for the Central Valley County



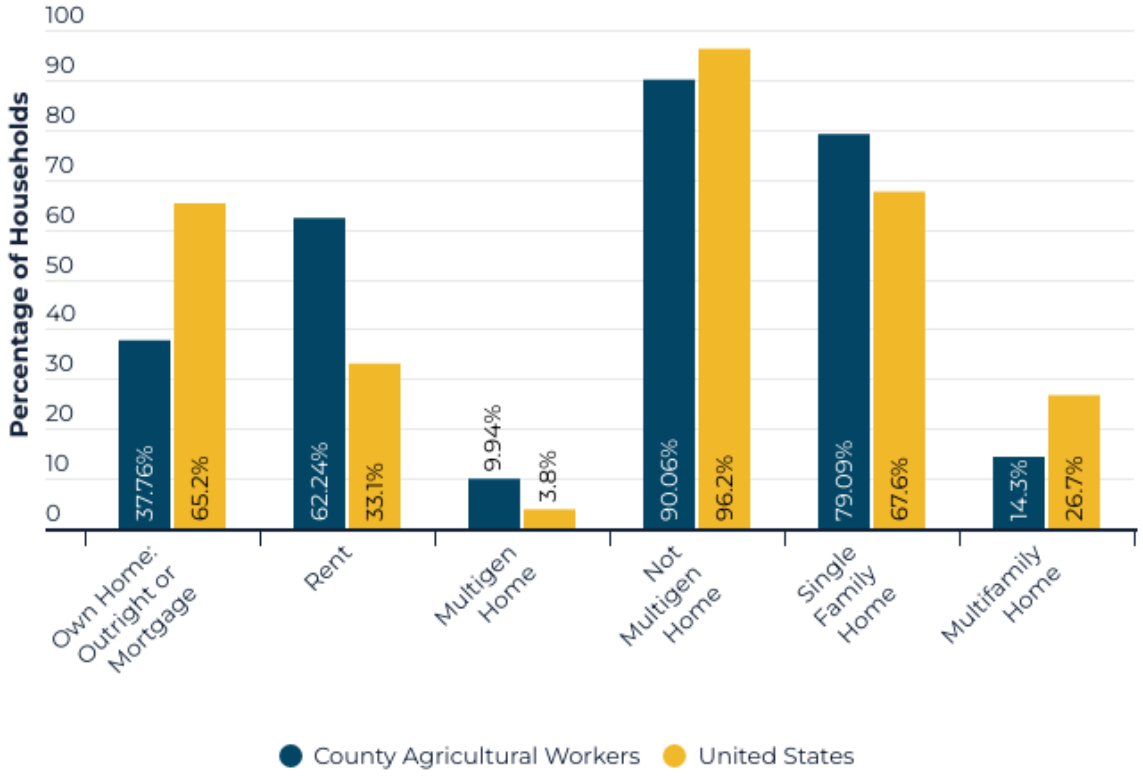
Source: Data presented in this chart is derived from IPUMS ACS 5-year sample datasets and tabulated by Housing Assistance Council
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit:
https://infogram.com/agworkers-ipums-comparison-chart-1h984wvwyjekz2p

Most agricultural worker households rely on the private housing market. Approximately 62 percent of agricultural workers rented their homes and 38 percent owned homes outright or had a mortgage. Roughly 78 percent lived in detached single-family homes, while about 7 percent lived in manufactured or mobile homes. The housing stock for agricultural workers was generally older: about 83 percent of homes were built before 2010, and only 7 percent were constructed between 2010

and 2024. These figures are consistent with the overall local market in which relatively little new housing is being produced, and existing homes carry much of the demand.

Agricultural Worker Household Traits

Central Valley County Household Counts

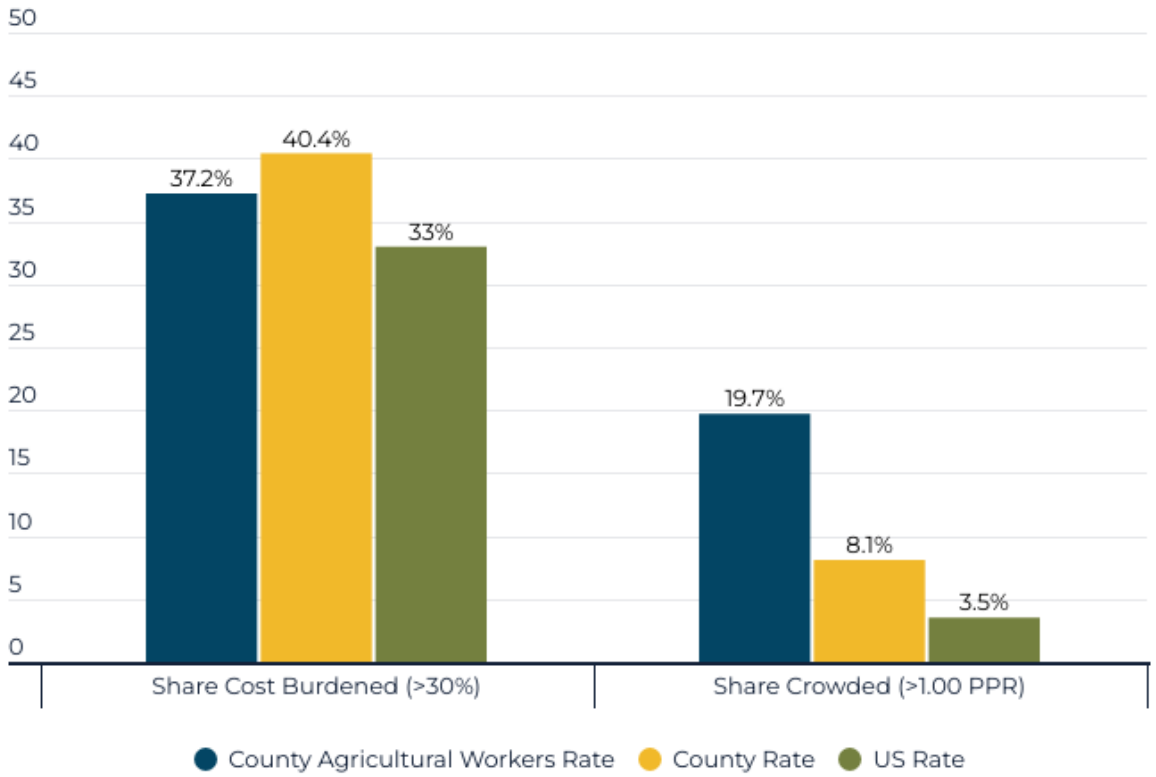


Source: Data presented in this chart are derived from IPUMS ACS 5-year sample datasets and tabulated by Housing Assistance Council
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit:
https://infogram.com/ag-worker-house-traits-1hnp27ejgjk5y4q

Affordability and crowding are the most prevalent housing concerns for agricultural workers in the Central Valley County. Approximately 37 percent of agricultural worker households were housing cost burdened, indicating they spent at least 30 percent of household income on housing, and about 15 percent were severely cost burdened. The median household spent about 23 percent of income on housing, but the median masks substantial hardship among lower-income households. Household crowding was especially pronounced among agricultural workers in the Central Valley County. Nearly 20 percent of agricultural worker households had more than one person per room (considered crowded by HUD standards), and 12.5 percent had more than two persons per bedroom (a HUD alternative criteria for measuring crowding). The persons-per-room rate was more than twice the countywide rate and more than five times the national rate.

Housing Cost Burden and Crowding Comparison

Rate of Households Experiencing Cost Burden and Crowding



Source: County-level data derived from IPUMS ACS 5-year sample 2020-2024 and tabulated by HAC. US-level data taken from US Census Bureau.
To access an interactive version of this chart, visit:
https://infogram.com/agworker-ipums-cost-burden-crowding-1h0n25o07399z4p

The statistical findings reinforce the community assessment. Local interviews and observations identified households doubling or tripling up, long waits for subsidized units, limited turnover, and persistent repair needs following flooding. PUMS can identify broad patterns of cost burden and crowding, but local evidence suggests that both substandard housing conditions and informal occupancy arrangements may be more prevalent than survey estimates indicate.

According to PUMS data, access to critical home infrastructure and appliances (basic plumbing, refrigerators, ovens etc.) has reached a high level of adoption among farmworkers residing in rural communities. It should be noted, however, that housing quality and standards of living metrics are limited in the PUMS database. Measurements of housing standards are few and far between, and crude when available.

Assessing the Entire County Housing Ecosystem

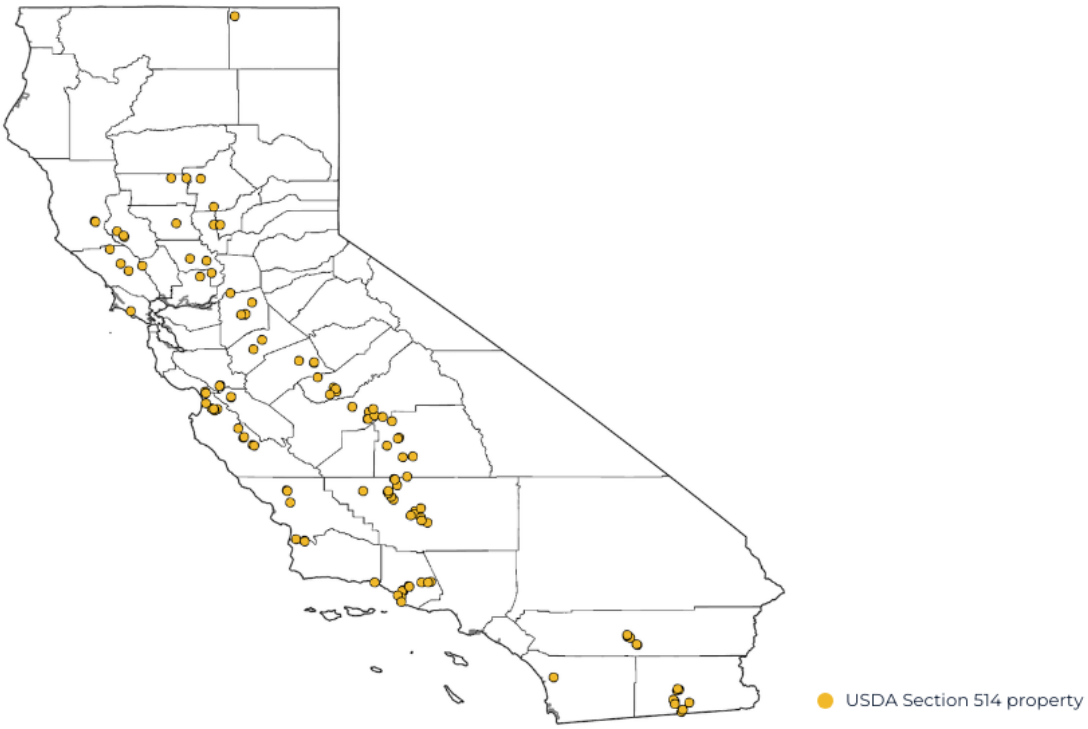
PUMS data faces some limitations as a tool to measure housing markets for agricultural workers, not least of which involve an inability to fully assess the government supported and employer-provided housing market. Market assessments for any area from a single township to national-level analyses can and should incorporate tools which measure all three housing markets. To account for these important market dynamics, the assessment also includes data and analysis using public and private data to more adequately understand and inform housing dynamics and needs for agricultural workers.

Employer-provided housing serves a distinct role in supporting the overall region's agricultural workforce, particularly through the H-2A program. According to U.S. Department of Labor FY 2025 H-2A disclosure data, the county contains 22 certified H-2A housing locations, including 14 employer-owned facilities and 8 rental properties, with capacity to house 763 certified H-2A workers. The distribution of these properties across multiple communities suggests a regional approach to housing temporary agricultural labor, allowing employers to locate workers near major agricultural production areas.

Although this county has substantial dairy production, an industry where employer provided housing is common, data are not readily or easily available on employer provided housing for this particular subsector, and the number of employer-provided units available in this community is unclear.

Publicly supported housing represents a smaller but critical part of the county housing ecosystem because it offers regulated, income-restricted, and often comparatively affordable units. The principal measurement sources for publicly supported housing in rural areas and among agricultural workers are USDA Rural Development administrative property data for USDA Section 514 and Section 515 housing programs, supplemented by data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) federally assisted housing data and the National Housing Preservation Database (NHPD). USDA records can identify property locations, program type, unit counts, rental assistance, loan characteristics, and projected program exit or maturity. The NHPD integrates address-level records from multiple federal housing programs and presents value-added data points such as subsidy expiration dates, physical inspection scores, ownership type, and preservation risk. Used together, these sources can produce a countywide inventory of publicly supported properties, units, and populations served. They do not consistently show whether residents work in agriculture, and local verification is needed to identify occupancy restrictions, waiting lists, vacancies, rents, and current property conditions.

Active USDA Section 514 Properties in California



Source: Housing Assistance Council Tabulations of USDA Data. State and county boundaries obtained from US Census TIGER/Line geographic data.

The Central Valley County contains four USDA Section 514 properties, which consist of 228 individual rental apartments specifically designated for agricultural workers. All Section 514 properties are located off-farm. The county also contains 14 USDA Section 515 rural rental properties which consist of 593 individual rental apartments, all of which are subject to affordability provisions. Section 515 homes and other federally assisted housing may serve agricultural worker households, even when the developments are not specifically designated for farm labor.

For a broader tabulation of publicly subsidized or supported housing, the National Housing Preservation Database reports that the Central Valley County has 49 property sites which contain 2,750 homes receiving some form of public-sector support. Many of these forms of assistance overlap, with one home corresponding to multiple programs. In addition to USDA Section 514 and 515 reported above, the Central Valley County has 1,441 properties receiving the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), 328 receiving HOME block grants, 351 receiving project-based Section 8 housing vouchers, 36 financed through Section 202 direct loans, and 421 which are designated as public housing. The 2,750 assisted homes represent about 3 percent of the ACS-estimated 90,872 total households in the county. This dearth of public-assisted housing options is particularly concerning given the 40 percent county-wide housing cost burden rate.

Photo: Manda LaPorte

Housing Ecosystem Assessment at the Community Level

Within the larger Central Valley County lies a small community that has been home to a substantial number of agricultural workers and their families for a long period of time. Surrounded by hundreds of thousands of acres of almond orchards, dairy operations, and other agricultural enterprises, the community is situated approximately 15 minutes from the county seat. While residents benefit from proximity to regional assets, including a nearby university, much of the community's stability and resilience is rooted in the surrounding agricultural economy. The community also serves as a hub for other nearby smaller agricultural towns, providing access to education services and community resources. Regional experts and housing practitioners helped identify this community as one with a substantial component of agricultural workers and recognized its potential as a test market for the assessment.

This element of the model recognizes that housing for agricultural workers has unique elements but also exists within a broader social, economic, and physical environment. Community characteristics such as neighborhood quality, infrastructure, local institutions, housing stock condition, development patterns, and resident perspectives often influence housing outcomes in ways that are not readily apparent in publicly available datasets. By integrating qualitative evidence with external demographic, economic, and housing data, this example of a smaller

community-based assessment provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the community's housing needs, assets, and opportunities.

The community-informed methodology is centered on three complementary components. First, researchers conducted interviews with local stakeholders, including community leaders, housing providers, public officials, nonprofit organizations, employers, and residents, as appropriate and with the assistance of local community leaders. The interviews were conducted in a range of venues including preliminary and field scoping discussions, on-site interviews in the community and follow-up and virtual discussions. This element of the assessment provided insights into housing characteristics, market dynamics, development barriers, and emerging opportunities.

Second, an on-site community visit documented existing housing conditions, neighborhood characteristics, and the physical environment through direct observation. The site visit allowed researchers to assess factors such as housing quality, signs of investment or disinvestment, land use patterns, infrastructure, accessibility, and other observable conditions that contribute to the overall housing landscape. Finally, qualitative findings were contextualized through the analysis of external demographic, economic, and housing datasets.

Evaluating agricultural worker housing also requires consideration of factors that extend beyond some traditional elements of housing that are often considered. These may include the broader environmental, occupational, and geographic context in which agricultural worker housing exists. These characteristics distinguish agricultural worker housing from conventional housing assessments and underscores the importance of methodological frameworks that account for both housing quality and the unique relationship between housing and agricultural production.

Agriculture is the economic foundation of the community. According to local leaders, a substantial share of residents have worked in agricultural production at some point in their lives, with many spending much of their careers in farm labor or related industries. The Census Bureau's 2020-2024 American Community Survey indicates that the agricultural sector is the largest source of employment in the town – more than double the rate of employment than for any other industry. This deep connection to agriculture influences local housing demand, household incomes, and long-term housing conditions.

According to the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates, the community has a population of approximately 3,500 residents.[39] Strong family and community ties, coupled with the region's agricultural employment opportunities, have helped sustain the community despite a slow but steady population decline, from 3,900 residents in 2020.

The economics of this agricultural community occupy a distinct, yet often incongruous pattern. Consistent with many agricultural communities, substantial

levels of wage employment do not equate to financial stability. At just over $42,000 the median household income for the community is less than half the median household income for California and the poverty rate is nine percentage points higher than the national and California rate at 21.4 percent. Taken together, these economic factors are important drivers of housing access and developing strategies for agricultural communities.

A small community with limited housing availability. Using data from the 2020-2024 American Community Survey, this specific agricultural community has an estimated 1,100 homes, nearly 97 percent of which are occupied, indicating a relatively tight housing market with few available homes.[I]

Owners and renters in this agricultural community are almost evenly represented. Within the housing stock itself, more than 90 percent of occupied homes are detached, single-family structures, while multifamily housing, manufactured or mobile homes, and other structures comprise only a small share. The community's homes are generally moderate in size, typically containing four to six rooms. While numerically few occupied units lack complete plumbing or kitchen facilities, the overall rates of these deficiencies are more than double the national and California levels. These indicators along with the reported prevalence of multiple housing problems suggest that broader concerns related to condition, adequacy, or modernization affect a substantial portion of the community's housing stock.

Importantly, numerous households continue to face housing distress related to the impacts of a major flood event that affected the community in recent years. Interviews and field observations revealed that fully three years after the disaster, some homeowners have not secured sufficient financial resources or assistance to complete necessary rehabilitation and recovery efforts. As a result, some households continue to live with unresolved structural damage, deferred repairs, or other housing deficiencies that affect quality of life and long-term housing stability.

These conditions illustrate how housing quality challenges in the community are shaped not only by age and maintenance of the housing stock, but also by the lasting effects of natural disasters and the ability of households to access recovery resources.

Crowding and affordability reflect pressure on the existing housing supply. Similar to its surrounding county dynamics, nearly 12 percent of occupied homes are crowded, including approximately 3 percent experiencing severe crowding. This high incidence of crowding reflects a combination of larger household sizes, limited housing choices, insufficient production, and affordability constraints. In a community dominated by single-family homes, crowding also illustrates that the

[I] Note: Data analysis for the community from U.S. Census Bureau 2020-2024 American Community Survey data represent all households and does not identify or differentiate conditions for households engaged in agricultural work.

physical form of the housing stock does not necessarily ensure adequate space or suitable housing arrangements for all households.

Like most communities in the nation, affordability is the most significant housing challenge. Housing-cost pressures are widespread, affecting more than one-third of households overall and more than half of renters. The median gross rent in this small community is $1,036, and nearly one-quarter of renters are severely cost burdened.

Government-supported housing plays an important role in meeting the affordable housing needs of agricultural workers and low-income households in the community. Of the community's approximately 1,100 housing units, approximately 170 units are specifically designated for agricultural workers, including USDA Section 514 Farm Labor Housing and migrant housing properties. These subsidized units typically range from $600 to $800 per month, while rents in the private market can reach $2,000 or more per month. This substantial gap between subsidized and market-rate housing creates significant affordability pressures.

The community includes several properties developed under the USDA Section 514 Farm Labor Housing Program, including two year-round farmworker housing developments that collectively provide more than 100 affordable apartments. These properties represent a critical source of regulated housing specifically designed to serve both permanent and seasonal agricultural workers and their families

The community also includes a migrant agricultural worker housing camp that provides approximately 60 seasonal units and associated migrant health services. This facility is primarily occupied during peak agricultural seasons. However, during the recent flood in the community, these units also served as immediate housing relief for residents who were displaced during the event.

Beyond farmworker-specific housing, the community benefits from a range of federal and state affordable housing investments. USDA Section 523 Mutual Self-Help Housing has contributed to affordable homeownership opportunities by enabling low-income households to build homes through cooperative construction efforts, reducing development costs while promoting long-term wealth building. In addition, a Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) with approximately 50 apartments expands the supply of affordable rental housing available to low- and moderate-income households, including agricultural families who may not qualify for dedicated farm labor housing.

HUD-supported housing plays a smaller but still important role in the local housing ecosystem. Available data indicates a total of eight HUD-assisted units, consisting of seven Housing Choice Vouchers and one Project-Based Section 8 unit. The relatively limited presence of HUD resources highlights the community's greater reliance on USDA programs and other rural affordable housing mechanisms.

Although this specific community supports dairy production, the research was not able to discern how many employer-provided units (common within this agricultural sector) are available in the community.

Although the surrounding region may appear to have abundant land, most of it is designated for agricultural use and is not available for residential development. Within the community itself, there are relatively few vacant or developable parcels. Housing turnover is also limited across both rental and ownership markets. Local community officials and residents noted homes rarely become available, and when they do, transactions often occur informally within social networks rather than through traditional real estate channels. As a result, new or growing households, particularly those seeking employment in agriculture, frequently depend on informal arrangements with extended family or friends due to the lack of available housing options.

Infrastructure limitations further restrict housing development and long-term growth. Water availability remains one of the most significant constraints on future development. As in many agricultural regions in California, residents must compete with large-scale agricultural operations for limited potable water resources. Community leaders have worked to expand water access through the development of additional wells; however, regulatory requirements and funding limitations have delayed implementation.

The community has also faced longstanding water and wastewater challenges that have complicated efforts to accommodate growth. While the community had developed a comprehensive wastewater system by the early 2000s during the renovation of a Section 514 property, the community's existing treatment and discharge practices became unsustainable due to local soil conditions. The Community Services District received a cease-and-desist order after untreated wastewater was discharged into a nearby waterway, requiring the community to secure a new site and develop an alternative treatment and disposal plan. The resulting planning, permitting, financing, and construction process took nearly 15 years and ultimately led to the development of a new wastewater treatment facility that reuses treated effluent through agricultural land application. While this investment significantly improved housing conditions and public health outcomes, ongoing water supply limitations continue to constrain new residential development.

Until additional water capacity is secured, the ability to expand housing in this community will remain limited, reinforcing existing affordability and availability challenges.

Despite its small size, this agricultural community has cultivated strong, long-standing partnerships that support housing stability and broader community development. Local residents, community leaders, nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions have worked collaboratively for decades to bring resources, build housing, and address infrastructure needs.

One of the most significant partners is Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), a regional nonprofit housing provider, which has been active in the community for nearly five decades. In addition to managing a USDA Section 514 Farm Labor Housing development, SHE provides pathways to homeownership through its mutual self-help housing program, building more than 300 homes in the community as of the summer of 2025,[40] enabling families to build homes through a cooperative construction model. Through its extensive housing development activities, SHE has become the driving force behind much of the community's newer housing stock and is widely associated with the development of high-quality affordable housing throughout the area. The nonprofit facilitated production in these subdivisions accounts for more than one quarter of the entire housing stock in the entire community. These are all homeowner occupied units and are observably among the highest quality homes in the community. Beyond housing production, SHE has played a central role in advancing infrastructure improvements, including wastewater system upgrades, and has supported home repair programs for households impacted by flooding.

Academic institutions have also contributed to local planning and research efforts. Partnerships with a nearby university have supported community surveys and studies focused on economic mobility, public health, and development priorities. These collaborations have helped elevate community perspectives, inform local decision-making, and connect this community to additional funding opportunities and policy resources.

Community members consistently express a desire for housing options that allow families to remain in this community over the long term. Key housing priorities include:

- Increasing access to affordable rental housing
- Expanding pathways to homeownership
- Supporting housing development that accommodates growing and multigenerational families
- Ensuring infrastructure improvements that enable sustainable growth

These goals reflect a broader vision of preserving a stable, resilient, agricultural community where residents can continue to live and work across generations.

Considerations and Limitations for the Test Assessment Model and Methods

Utilizing PUMS data to identify and analyze the housing conditions of agricultural workers has strong potential. The approaches implemented in the county-level test assessment section can be repeated in other locations, across time, and focusing on units as small as a single PUMA, or as large as the entire nation. The

individual and/or household level of analysis allows fine grain computation of the relationship between multiple variables at the smallest unit of analysis possible.

A national application could define agricultural workers consistently across all states, estimate housing outcomes by region or agricultural industry, and identify places where high housing cost burden, crowding, low vacancy, or limited homeownership are concentrated. It could also be paired with local case studies to select communities for deeper field assessment.

A PUMS centered data approach also has important limitations. PUMA geographies often encompass multiple communities and may obscure conditions in a small agricultural settlement. The ACS is a general-purpose household survey rather than a survey designed specifically for agricultural workers, so employment definitions may omit some workers or include workers whose connection to agriculture differs from the population of interest. Seasonal, migrant, employer-housed, undocumented, doubled-up, and informally housed workers may be undercounted. Housing-quality measures are limited and do not comprehensively capture mold, pests, structural deterioration, flood damage, code violations, crowding concealed from survey responses, or the condition of employer-provided housing. Finally, and importantly, below the PUMA level there is an inability to separate the housing specific social, economic and housing conditions of agricultural worker households from secondary data, making this approach largely ineffective for agricultural worker characteristics at lower levels of geography (e.g. smaller county, census tract, or census designated place).

PUMS data is largely limited to the private market. Agricultural communities like those within the Central Valley County contain an array of housing options, including publicly provided and-or subsidized housing, and, increasingly, employer-provided housing for agricultural workers. PUMS data can illuminate dynamics in the private market with flexibility and recency, but it represents one tool in the toolkit for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to capture the landscape of agricultural worker housing.

The test assessment model provides a framework for community-informed data collection and analysis. There is an adage in rural housing research that “statistical data will only get you so far.” This expression is crystalized further in research and analysis on agricultural workers. Within a myriad of social, economic, and legal dynamics, agricultural workers often live in the shadows, and these same dynamics may preclude cooperation or accurate representation in many traditional large scale dataset social scientists often rely on. The community informed methods and analysis presented in the agricultural community level assessment provided crucial granular and contextual information that were simply not available in the PUMS level analysis presented in the county level assessment. Even if the data were available, some of these important characteristics, issues, and nuance may be obscured through secondary or even private market data analysis alone. The model is presented as an example for researchers and communities who are analyzing

agricultural worker conditions, strategies or solutions at smaller community level where traditional data may be limited as well as to help provide context to a larger market analysis.

While valuable, some elements of the qualitative community-informed method can be time and resource intensive challenging cost feasibility. Meaningful engagement with agricultural advocates and workers often requires more intensive outreach than conventional research methods. This includes establishing relationships with trusted community partners. The process may also include interviews and data collection outside traditional working hours, providing interpretation or translation, and traveling to remote workplaces, housing sites, or rural communities. These considerations can increase both the time and cost associated with fieldwork, and data collection and may limit the number of communities or workers that can feasibly be included within a given research budget and timeline.

Private and proprietary data resources were explored and tested, but not included in the test assessment findings. The availability of data is evolving at a rapid pace, and increasingly private and/or proprietary data are being incorporated into mixed methods research to enrich analysis and findings. The assessment tested the applicability and feasibility of two proprietary, parcel level datasets. These private data resources were primarily used for triangulation and validation of the PUMA and community analysis and were ultimately not publicly presented in this report. Private parcel data presents an emerging and potentially rich resource in today's world of data analysis – especially at a community level. At the same time, these resources can often be expensive, cost prohibitive and not specifically designed to assess housing conditions among communities and populations like agricultural workers.

The approach helped produce a holistic evaluation of an agricultural community and its resident's housing environment by triangulating observational evidence, stakeholder knowledge, and a novel quantitative data analysis. This mixed quantitative and qualitative approach strengthens the validity of the findings but also provides a deeper understanding of the local conditions, contextual influences, and community priorities that shape housing needs and inform future planning, investment, and policy decisions for often overlooked agricultural workers.

STRATEGIES, SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE HOUSING ECOSYSTEMS FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

Photo: Lance George

The findings from this initial research, combined with stakeholder interviews, reveal that agricultural worker housing dynamics are not the result of a single policy issue or market condition, but rather a complex intersection of affordability pressures, workforce realities, regulatory barriers, infrastructure limitations, and persistent data gaps. Across the nation, agricultural workers continue to face significant obstacles in accessing safe, decent, and affordable housing, while developers, community organizations, and public agencies struggle to navigate fragmented systems and limited resources. At the same time, stakeholders identified promising practices, successful state-level programs, and opportunities for reform that could strengthen the agricultural ecosystem and access for agricultural workers and their families.

The recommendations below are informed by the current literature, data analysis, and stakeholder perspectives gathered throughout this research and are intended to guide policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and advocates toward a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable agricultural worker housing system. These recommendations recognize the diversity of the agricultural workforce and emphasize the importance of community-centered solutions that align housing policy with the realities of rural communities and the workers who sustain our nation's food systems.

Agricultural worker housing is a critical component of a stable and resilient food system. Stakeholders consistently reported hearing from workers who feel they cannot afford to remain in the industry due to low wages, rising housing costs, and general safety. While these challenges directly affect workers and their families, they also affect the agricultural workforce on which farms, dairy, and food-processing facilities depend. Housing instability can undermine worker recruitment and retention, creating broader challenges for agricultural production. Strengthening housing opportunities, policies, and programming for agricultural workers is therefore an investment in the stability of the workforce that supports the nation's food supply.

Agricultural workers' housing requirements should match the work force. Agriculture remains a complex and often controversial industry, historically sustained by immigrant, migrant, and minority labor. Despite this, housing policies and programs have not consistently aligned with the needs of this workforce. These limitations create unnecessary barriers to accessing safe, affordable housing and can push agricultural families into precarious living conditions. Housing policies should adopt inclusive eligibility criteria and better reflect the demographic and economic realities of agricultural workers and their families.

Dairy and processing workers should be included in agricultural worker housing research, policy, and programming. Agricultural worker housing discussions often focus on seasonal crop workers, despite the significant role that dairy and food processing workers play within the agricultural economy. Both sectors rely heavily on immigrant labor, face persistent workplace hazards, and experience many of the same social and economic barriers that affect field-based agricultural workers. Dairy workers frequently contend with employer-provided housing, housing quality concerns, and limited access to housing resources, while processing workers often live in rural communities with constrained housing markets and affordability challenges. Excluding these workers from agricultural housing programs, data collection efforts, and policy discussions create an incomplete understanding of the agricultural workforce and overlooks housing needs that directly affect the broader food production system.

Community development organizations and communities need to be a part of the agricultural worker housing policy conversation. Stakeholders engaged in this research consistently emphasized the importance of incorporating community

voice. Many participants had direct, personal, or professional connections to agricultural work and communities, and noted that the findings presented reflect longstanding, well-known challenges. However, due to the broader political sensitivity surrounding the agricultural sector, these perspectives are often excluded from policy discussions. Ensuring that community development organizations, workers, and residents are actively engaged in shaping housing policy is essential. Excluding these voices undermines not only housing outcomes but also the broader economic stability and resilience of agricultural communities.

Federal farmworker housing resources should be modernized. While providing one of the few affordable and high-quality housing options, public resources such as USDA's Section 514/516 programs were often described as antiquated, underfunded, and misaligned with current market realities by housing practitioners and developers. Barriers include high pre-development costs, rigid income and documentation rules, inconsistent funding cycles, unreimbursed early costs, and long development timelines. Some organizations reported abandoning or avoiding these programs in favor of more flexible state or tax-credit financing when available.

While opportunities for improvement exist, examples of state programming have proven to close the gap on housing development needs. Stakeholders consistently noted that many federal programs have become less responsive to the realities of developing affordable housing in rural areas. In contrast, state initiatives, such as California's Joe Serna Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant program, have helped close financing gaps and support development in agricultural communities. Although not without limitations, these programs have enabled progress in addressing persistent housing shortages. Expanding funding, increasing flexibility, and broadening the reach of these state-level efforts will be critical to meeting demand.

State programs and blended funding models are more effective but highly competitive. In states like California and Washington, state agricultural worker housing programs and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits are viewed as more viable tools, though competition is intense and funding inconsistent. Developers increasingly blend agricultural worker units with general affordable housing to secure financing, which can dilute targeting but improve project feasibility. However, newer and smaller housing developers and non-profits, often serving more rural communities with limited capacity, are still struggling to find entry points into many of these programs.

Housing repair and preservation are critical stopgaps. Given limited new construction, repair and preservation programs play a vital role in stabilizing existing housing. Stakeholders described strong demand for repair assistance, particularly for owner-occupied homes and older manufactured or mobile homes, but emphasized that funding levels are insufficient to meet need. Many believe that the use of H-2A workers is making renovating existing housing stock difficult as they are competing against growers for access. Others noted that their current 514 units were aging and

close to amortization and are interested in decoupling the units and using them solely as rental assistance options.

Development and infrastructure regulations and procedures should be easily understood and addressed by rural agricultural communities. Housing developers and agricultural communities face significant challenges in accessing housing programs. Across local, state, and federal levels, systems are often overly complex, highly competitive, and insufficiently funded. As a result, developers frequently need to layer multiple funding sources to finance a single project. At the same time, infrastructure rules and regulations are continually evolving creating additional uncertainty. While these changes may be necessary, many rural communities and nonprofit housing organizations lack the capacity and flexibility to quickly adapt. Capacity-building resources and technical assistance should be embedded within development and infrastructure programs to support effective navigation and implementation.

Homelessness and housing instability should be explicitly incorporated into policy and assessments of agricultural worker housing. This study primarily focused on the conditions and characteristics of housed agricultural workers. Agricultural workers, however, face many of the same pressures that contribute to homelessness nationally. Conventional measures of homelessness may also understate housing insecurity among agricultural workers, who may be less likely to enter shelters or formal homelessness-service systems and instead experience less visible forms of homelessness, including living in vehicles, motels, informal structures, temporary labor camps, or doubling up with other households. Consequently, policies, programs and assessments of farmworker housing should look beyond conventional measures of housing to also consider the full continuum of housing instability from precarious temporary arrangements to sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. Incorporating these realities across the spectrum provides a more complete understanding of unmet housing needs and can help communities design housing, homelessness-prevention, and supportive-service strategies that better reflect the distinctive circumstances of agricultural workers.

Expand support for affordable homeownership models in rural and agricultural communities. While much of the current farmworker housing landscape focuses on rental development, stakeholders emphasized the need for greater investment in affordable homeownership opportunities beyond USDA's Section 523 Mutual Self-Help Housing and Section 502 loan programs. Shared-equity models, including community land trusts, limited-equity cooperatives, and deed-restricted homeownership programs, can provide long-term affordability while helping workers and their families build stability and wealth. Expanding technical assistance, financing tools, and dedicated funding streams for these models could help diversify the range of housing solutions available to agricultural workers.

Advocacy, messaging, and high-quality research play a critical role. Normalizing agricultural workers as essential community members and framing housing as economic infrastructure. Agricultural workers are not unique in the fact that they too want a pathway to homeownership. National organizations should be encouraged to amplify local stories, elevate visual and qualitative evidence, advocate for consistent funding, and push for policy reforms that better align housing options with today's agricultural workforce.

Data and Research Specific Recommendations

Data and information on agricultural worker housing need to be sustained and expanded. This research study clearly indicates that data gaps hinder effective policy and program design. The cancellation or limitations of national surveys and fear-driven underreporting further exacerbate these gaps. There is strong interest in community-based, trusted data collection efforts that better reflect the housing conditions and lived experiences of agricultural workers. This research highlights the fragmented nature of existing data, relying on seven datasets and stakeholder interviews to construct a pixelated understanding of housing conditions. Developing a centralized, accessible dataset would strengthen capacity, improve analysis, and support more effective policy and program design.

Continue and expand the NAWS to include more data and information on housing. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) is an incredibly valuable resource for insights into the agricultural worker employment sector. NAWS provides individual-level survey data on a wide range of agricultural worker characteristics, including a limited slate of variables focused on housing. NAWS is limited, however, for community assessments such as this one, due to the lack of published data from recent years (no new data after 2022 is available), lack of focus on housing specifically, and inflexible categorization of agricultural workers which does not match HAC's definition. These limitations highlight the value PUMS data which address (at least in part) all these limitations. When used in tandem, they can provide greater insights into conditions that inform strategies and solutions agricultural worker communities.

More research and attention to employer-provided housing is needed. This report included the important market component of employer provided housing. This form of housing is somewhat unique and more prevalent to the agricultural industry - especially with the recent growth in H-2A visas where employers are required to provide housing for visa holders. However, access to data and information on employer provided proved difficult to ascertain and analyses at a significant scale. Future research should focus on a more robust analysis of H-2A administrative data as well as methods and techniques to better identify and analyze agricultural sectors that utilize and rely on employer provided housing such as dairy operations.

A community-centered approach is vital to recognize, legitimize, and improve the housing ecosystem for agricultural workers across the nation. At its core any

research should include a community-centered, led, and facilitated approach to recognize and legitimize the housing systems, housing resources, and housing needs and aspirations of agricultural workers and their families. Grounded research will further inform strategies and solutions to critical housing needs, and at a larger level will contribute to improved and safer food production, health, and systems for producers, consumers, and workers.

Research involving agricultural workers should employ heightened standards of data protection, confidentiality, and community sensitivity, particularly in an environment of increased uncertainty and concern. Agricultural workers may be especially reluctant to participate in surveys, interviews, or other data-collection efforts when they believe that information about themselves, their families, employers, workplaces, housing locations, or communities could be used for purposes beyond the research itself. These concerns can reduce participation, introduce substantial nonresponse and selection bias, and – more importantly – create potential risks for workers and their families. Researchers should therefore apply a "do no harm" principle throughout the research process, collecting only information necessary for clearly defined research purposes; avoiding unnecessarily identifiable or sensitive information; establishing rigorous protocols for confidentiality, data security, access, retention, and reporting; and carefully considering whether highly detailed geographic or demographic findings could inadvertently identify individuals or small populations. Whenever possible, research should also be designed and implemented in partnership with trusted community-based organizations and worker-serving institutions, with clear and accessible communication about how information will and will not be used. Protecting worker confidentiality should not be viewed simply as a procedural research requirement, but as a fundamental component of the research.

A comprehensive national assessment of agricultural worker housing is needed to establish a consistent and actionable understanding of housing conditions, needs, and effective strategies across the United States. It has been more than two decades since a large-scale national assessment of housing conditions for agricultural workers has been published. In that time period the agricultural workplace, economy, and policy landscape have shifted dramatically. Participants and experts in this research consistently emphasized that while existing data sources, including the NAWS, provide valuable information, they are not designed to capture the full range of local housing conditions, community infrastructure, housing market dynamics – in particular housing quality – and place-based factors that shape agricultural worker housing access. Investment in a comprehensive national assessment is an opportunity to fill critical knowledge gaps that existing datasets and resources cannot fully address. This research presents a beta model that can be refined and expanded to meet such an analysis by pairing a novel data approach with a community-informed component to more fully and comprehensively assess the needs of this distinct community. Investing in a robust

national assessment would provide federal, state, and local policymakers, housing providers, agricultural employers, and community organizations with a stronger evidence base for targeting resources, coordinating programs, measuring change over time, and developing housing solutions responsive to the evolving agricultural workforce.

APPENDIX: DATA, RESOURCES, AND METHODS

About the Data

Within this report HAC utilizes several datasets including the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS), the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey data (ACS), U.S. Department of Agriculture data (USDA), U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration Disclosure Data, and U.S Census Bureau's Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS).

U.S. Department of Labor National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)[41]

The primary purposes of the NAWS are to monitor the terms and conditions of agricultural employment and describe the demographic characteristics of hired crop workers.

The survey also generates information for various Federal agencies that oversee farm worker programs. NAWS findings have been used for occupational injury and health surveillance, estimating the number and characteristics of crop workers and their dependents, and program planning.

The NAWS is unique for its broad coverage of the characteristics of hired crop workers and their dependents and its nearly year-round interviewing schedule. Data are collected throughout the year, over three cycles, to reflect the seasonality of agricultural production and employment. The NAWS differs from other Federal worker surveys in that:

1. Crop Workers are interviewed at their workplaces rather than at home;
2. Only currently employed persons are sampled; and
3. Data is collected directly from crop workers

Both migrant and seasonal crop workers are sampled in the NAWS.

The use of an employer-based sample rather than a household-based sample increases the likelihood that migrant workers will be interviewed in the NAWS. In addition, the survey is designed to capture workers engaged in seasonal agricultural tasks by conducting interviews over three cycles. Recognizing that there are several federal and state definitions for migrant and seasonal workers, the NAWS collects data that allow analysts to use varying definitions of 'migrant' and 'seasonal.'

NAWS data are limited because the NAWS sampling universe does not include:

- Persons employed at eligible establishments who do not perform crop-related work, such as secretaries or mechanics, unless such workers also perform crop-related work; and
- Crop workers with a H-2A visa (a temporary-employment visa for foreign agricultural workers)
- The NAWS interviews farm workers who are currently working in agriculture. Crop workers who have been out of work for over a year are not included in the sampling frame.

- Except for California, the public data are not available at the state level.
- The health condition variables report diagnoses over the life of the respondent and may not represent health conditions at the time of interview. Work-relatedness is not assessed for the health conditions.

U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Estimates[42]

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, social, economic, and housing data every year. The U.S. Census Bureau presents data from the ACS in the form of both single-year and five-year estimates. These estimates are fundamentally different from data presented through the decennial census or ACS's predecessor, the decennial census "long form."

In order to deliver more timely information for all the geographic areas served by the decennial long form, the Census Bureau designed the ACS as a sample survey using a continuous measurement approach to data collection. A sample of 3.5 million addresses is drawn from the Census Bureau's master address file each year.[43]

ACS survey questionnaires are sent to approximately 295,000 addresses across the country every month.[44] Addresses from which a questionnaire is not returned by mail are followed up, first in an attempt to obtain the information by telephone, and then, for a sample of nonresponding households, in person by a Census Bureau field interviewer.

Based on responses from the series of 12 independent monthly samples each calendar year, the ACS provides estimates of demographic, housing, social, and economic characteristics for all states, as well as for cities, counties, metropolitan areas, and population groups of 65,000 or more. These estimates, based on a full year's worth of collected ACS data, are called "one-year estimates." For less populated areas, geographies with a population less than 65,000 people, it takes five years to accumulate enough survey data to achieve data estimates with a statistical reliability similar to those produced with the prior decennial census long-form.[45] These "five-year estimates" are published for all census geographies each year. The five-year data represents the only estimates for small populations (less than 65,000) each year.[46]

A detailed description of ACS data collection methodology and the survey's sample design may be found at:

https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design-and-methodology.html

For more information on using and interpreting ACS data please consult the Census Bureau

Documentation: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/library/handbooks.html.

USDA Rural Development Sections 514 and 515 Property Data.[47]

This analysis uses administrative property-level data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Multifamily Housing (MFH) portfolio, accessed through the USDA Service Center Agencies Online Services data portal. The Section 514 and Section 515 dataset provides information on active Farm Labor Housing and Rural Rental Housing properties, including property location, program designation, unit counts, occupancy characteristics, rental assistance participation, loan and financing attributes, ownership and management information, and project status. These administrative records are maintained by USDA Rural

Development and are updated periodically to reflect changes in the multifamily housing portfolio. The data were used to identify the location and characteristics of USDA-financed affordable housing developments, estimate the number of units available to agricultural workers and other rural residents, and analyze the geographic distribution of publicly supported rental housing.

H-2A Labor Certification Disclosure Data.[48]

This analysis uses H-2A disclosure data published by the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Foreign Labor Certification (OFLC) through the Foreign Labor Certification Performance Data portal. The dataset contains selected information from employer applications for H-2A temporary agricultural labor certifications that have received a final determination. Disclosure records include employer and worksite information, geographic location, job characteristics, dates of employment, requested worker positions, wages offered, and application outcomes. The data are released quarterly and annually to support public transparency and facilitate research on labor certification trends and agricultural workforce demand. Because the files contain only cases with final determinations, applications that are pending review are not included. Additionally, certain personally identifiable information and selected open-text fields are excluded from the public-use files. These data were used to examine the geographic distribution of H-2A employment, estimate certified worker demand, and analyze relationships between agricultural labor demand and housing conditions in rural communities.

Qualitative Stakeholder Interviews

The research conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with practitioners, housing developers, advocates, service providers, researchers, employers, agricultural workers, and workforce representatives engaged in agricultural worker housing across diverse geographic regions. Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across key stakeholder categories and agricultural worker populations, including dairy workers, migrant and settled workers, and mixed-status families. Additional interviewees were identified through snowball sampling, with participants recommending other experts to provide complementary regional or topical insights.

Interviews followed a standardized protocol organized around seven thematic domains: (1) background and regional context; (2) housing access and availability; (3) affordability and quality; (4) programs and policy; (5) health and safety; (6) data gaps; and (7) future needs and recommendations. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency across interviews while preserving flexibility to explore region-specific dynamics and emerging issues. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to indicate their preferred level of anonymity and whether their name and organization could be cited in acknowledgments or attributed quotations.

U.S. Census Bureau's Public Use Microdata.[49]

The analysis for the test assessment areas uses data from the 5-year sample dataset from the American Community Survey (ACS) published by PUMS, using observations from 2020-2024. All statistics presented in this section should be considered an estimate of the average across those five years for the population. PUMS implements survey methodologies and post-survey weighting strategies to ensure the sampled group reflects the population as closely as possible. HAC researchers used a comparison strategy to test the validity of the PUMS data by comparing statistical outputs to those published in NAWS. While not all values matched

exactly with published NAWS statistics, the overall shape of the statistical output was sufficiently similar to generate confidence in the output produced with PUMS data focusing on agricultural worker populations and using variables not included in the NAWS survey.

PUMS Data Tables:

Agricultural Worker Demographics – Central Valley County

Category	Mean	Median
Age	44.60	45
Years in USA	23.72	23
Weeks Worked Last Year	40.91	52
Person Income Total (annual)	27511.84	25734
Family Income Total (annual)	72094.66	63764
Household Percentage of Poverty Rate	227.45	209
Foreign Born Person	8902	83.31%
US Born Person	1784	16.69%
Female	3208	30.02%
Male	7478	69.98%
American Indian/Alaska Native	132	1.24%
Black	157	1.47%
Other/Multiple	9503	88.93%
White	894	8.37%
Hispanic: Mexican	9626	90.08%
Hispanic: Other	383	3.58%
Not Hispanic	677	6.34%
NA	1784	16.69%
Naturalized Citizen	1364	12.76%
Not a Citizen	7538	70.54%
Abroad a year ago	414	3.87%
Moved between states	5	0.05%
Moved within state	923	8.64%

Agricultural Worker Housing Characteristics – Central Valley County

category	count	proportion
Home: Owned or being bought	2918	37.76%
Home: Rented	4809	62.24%
Mortgaged/deed of trust	1941	25.12%
Less than 10 acres	5682	73.53%
More than 10 acres	940	12.17%
Foodstamp Recipient: No	6112	79.10%
Foodstamp Recipient: Yes	1615	20.90%
Linguistically Isolated	2606	33.73%

Not Linguistically Isolate	5121	66.27%
1 Family Attached	111	1.44%
1 Family Detached	6000	77.65%
10-19 Family	128	1.66%
2 Family	215	2.78%
3-4 Family	393	5.09%
5-9 Family	224	2.90%
50+ Family	145	1.88%
Mobile home/trailer	511	6.61%
No Internet	969	12.54%
Internet, w/out subscription	319	4.13%
Internet with subscription	6439	83.33%
1 Gen Home	2129	27.55%
2 Gen Home	4830	62.51%
3+ Gen Home	768	9.94%
Built: 1950-1970	986	12.76%
Built 1970-1990	2261	29.26%
Built: 1990-2010	3199	41.40%
Built: 2010-2024	568	7.35%
Built: Before 1950	713	9.23%
All Homes: Cost burden >= 0.30	2876	37.22%
All Homes: Cost burden >= 0.50	1125	14.56%
Renters: Cost burden >= 0.30	1823	37.91%
Renters: Cost burden >= 0.50	731	15.20%
Homeowner: Cost burden >= 0.30	1053	36.09%
Homeowner: Cost burden >= 0.50	394	13.50%
Crowding: PPR > 1	1523	19.71%
Crowding: PPB > 2	962	12.45%
Heat: Bottled/tanked gas	114	1.48%
Heat: Electricity	2158	27.93%
Heat: No fuel used	25	0.32%
Heat: Other	217	2.81%
Heat: Solar	219	2.83%
Heat: Utility gas	4855	62.83%
Heat: Wood	139	1.80%
category	**mean**	**median**
First Mortgage Amount (month)	1295.05	1179
Second Mortgage Amount (month)	1001.86	1338
Property Insurance (annual)	1180.58	1000
Rent (month)	1045.04	1000
Mobile Home Costs (annual)	8242.01	8016

Cost of Electricity (Annual)	2275.15	1848
Cost of Gas (Annual)	1253.42	960
Cost of Water (Annual)	929.49	950
Cost of Heating Fuel (Annual)	894.55	515
Household Income	73979.55	65000
Home Value	428918.78	345000
Number of Rooms	5.26	5
Cost Burden: All households	0.31	0.23
Cost Burden: Renters only	0.32	0.25
Cost Burden: Homeowners only	0.28	0.22

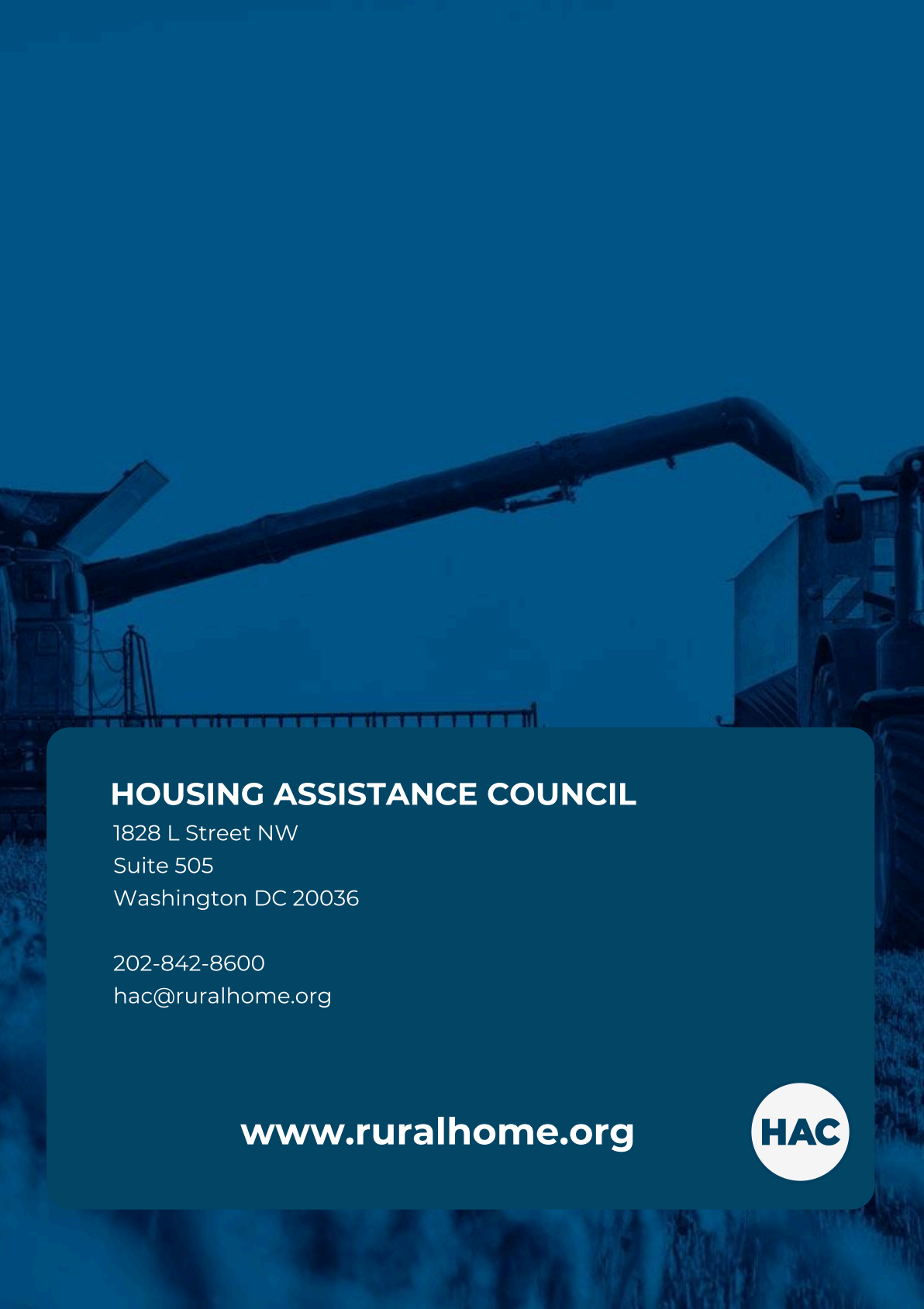
Programmatic and Technical Notes

H-2A visa holders are technically allowed to occupy Section 514 Farm Labor Housing. A significant policy change affecting this housing market occurred in 2018, when Congress expanded eligibility for USDA Section 514 Farm Labor Housing to include agricultural workers admitted under H-2A temporary agricultural visas.[50] Prior to this change, USDA-financed farm labor housing was generally limited to domestic farmworkers and other workers with more permanent work authorization. Because the H-2A program requires landlords to identify housing for their workers in advance and the Section 514 program does not allow landlords to pre-lease units, H-2A workers miss out on this opportunity. Even if H-2A workers were able to access Section 514 units, in some parts of the country this housing stock is already scarce and its use for H-2A workers would leave limited options for in-country farmworkers.

NOTES

1. Holden, Christopher, "Bitter Harvest: Housing Conditions of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers," *The Human Cost of Food*. University of Texas Press, 2021, 169-95.
2. Carroll, Daniel, Samuel Gabbard, and Jose Hernandez, "Changing Characteristics of U.S. Farm Workers: 21 Years of Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey," U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Office of Policy Development and Research, May 2005, https://migrationfiles.ucdavis.edu/uploads/cf/files/2011-may/carroll-changing-characteristics.pdf.
3. Fung, Wenson, Kimberly Prado, Amanda Gold, et al., "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2021-2022: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Crop Workers," U.S. Department of Labor, Research Report No. 17. September 2023.
4. Housing Assistance Council tabulations of NAWS 1994-2022 data.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Housing Assistance Council tabulations of NAWS 2021-2022 data.
9. Housing Assistance Council tabulations of NAWS 2021-2022 data – calculated using weighted averages of farmwoker household rates.
10. U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2022,* September 12, 2023, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/income-poverty-health-insurance-coverage.html.
11. Library of Congress, "1942: Bracero Program," A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States (Washington, DC: Library of Congress), https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program.
12. Baker Institute for Public Policy, *Feeding America: How Immigrants Sustain US Agriculture* (Houston, TX: Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy), https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/feeding-america-how-immigrants-sustain-us-agriculture.
13. HAC tabulations of 2021-2022 NAWS Data.
14. Quandt,Carol Brooke, Kathleen Fagan, Allyson Howe, Thomas K. Thornburg, and Stephen A. McCurdy, "Farmworker Housing in the United States and Its Impact on Health," NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy 25, no. 3 (2015): 263-286, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/202585/cdc_202585_DS1.pdf.
15. Findings from HAC interviews with stakeholders, 2025-2026.
16. Villajero, Don, *The Landscape of Farm Worker Housing: Issues and Trends,* (California Institute for Rural Studies, 2015).
17. Housing Assistance Council tabulations of NAWS 2021-2022 data.
18. Arcury, Thomas. A., Susan Gabbard, Bryan Bell, Vanessa Casanova, Joan Flocks, Jennifer Swanberg, Melinda Wiggins, Collecting Comparative Data on Farmworker Housing and Health: Recommendations for Collecting Housing and Health Data Across Places and Time, 2015, New Solutions, 25(3), 287-312, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9109263/.
19. U.S. Department of Labor, Rescission of Coordinated Enforcement Regulations, 91 Fed. Reg. 55744 (August 31, 2026), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/08/31/2026-17726/rescission-of-coordinated-enforcement-regulations.
20. Findings from HAC interviews with stakeholders, 2025-2026.
21. Cook, Jennifer A. 2023, " Beyond the Agricultural "Suffering Slot": Structural Agency in U.S. Farm Work," Anthropology of Work Review 44(2): 69–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/awr.12261.
22. Julian Samora Research Institute (JSRI), "JSRI Research Analyzes Farmworker Housing," (East Lansing, Michigan: NEXO VIII, 1999), https://jsri.msu.edu/upload/nexo/Nexo%20Fall%201999.pdf.
23. JSRI, "JSRI Research Analyzes Farmworker Housing."
24. HAC tabulations of U.S. DOL' s Employment and Training Administration Disclosure Data (FY2008-FY2024).
25. Farmworker Justice, *Farmworkers Housing and Health*.
26. "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (INA)," as amended (8 USC § § 1101, 1184, and 1188), 20 CFR 655 Subpart B and 29 CFR Part 501, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-1376/pdf/COMPS-1376.pdf.

27. U.S. Department of Labor, "Fact Sheet #26G: H-2A Housing Standards for Rental and Public Accommodations," U.S. Department of Labor, November 2022, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/26g-housing-standards-for-rental-and-public-accommodations-H-2A.
28. Bauer, Mary, "Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2013, https://www.splcenter.org/20130218/close-slavery-guestworker-programs-united-states.
29. House Committee on Agriculture, Crawford & Davis Release Interim Agriculture Labor Report, (Washington, November 7, 2023), https://agriculture.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=7715.
30. Castillo, "U.S. Farm Employers Respond."
31. Castillo, "U.S. Farm Employers Respond."
32. "H-2A Guest Worker Fact Sheet," NCFH, 2020 https://www.ncfh.org/h-2a-guest-workers-fact-sheet.html.
33. Centro de los Derechos del Migrante, Inc. (CDM), *Ripe For Reform: Abuses of Agricultural Workers in the H-2A Visa Program* (2020), 27, https://cdmigrante.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Ripe-for-Reform.pdf.
34. Martin, Philip*, Immigration and Farm Labor: From Unauthorized to H-2A for Some?*, (Migration Policy Institute, August 2017), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Martin-ImmigrationAgricultureH2AWorkers-FINAL.pdf.
35. U.S Department of Agriculture. *Fiscal Year 2023 Multifamily Housing Annual Occupancy Report. February 20, 2024.* Results of the 2023 MFH Annual Fair Housing Occupancy Report.
36. Ibid.
37. National Rural Housing Coalition, "Fast Facts! Farm Labor Housing Strengthens Rural Economies," 2020, https://ruralhousingcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Section-514-516-Farm-Labor-1.7.20-1.pdf.
38. HAC, USDA Section 514/516.
39. HAC tabulations of 2024 ACS data.
40. Self-Help Enterprises, 2025 Annual Report (Visalia, CA: Self-Help Enterprises, March 2026), https://www.selfhelpenterprises.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/SHE-2025-ANNUAL-REPORT-.pdf.
41. Excerpted from the U.S. Department of Labor: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey/overview.
42. "American Community Survey Information Guide," U.S. Census Bureau, 2017, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/programs-surveys/acs/about/ACS_Information_Guide.pdf.
43. U.S. Census Bureau, Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What All Data Users Need to Know (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2020), https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/acs/acs_general_handbook_2020.pdf.
44. Ibid.
45. The following Federal Register notice notes the goal to produce ACS five-year estimates that are as reliable as those produced with the old decennial census long form: https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2010/09/20/2010-23373/american-community-survey-5-year-data-product-plans.
46. Previously, as late as 2013, the American Community Survey included three-year estimates that covered all geographies with populations down to a 20,000 or greater threshold. This meant there were one-year estimates (geographies with populations 65,000 or greater), three-year estimates (geographies with populations of 20,000 or greater), and five-year estimates (all geographies). Since 2014, there are one-year and five-year products only. The following ACS website describes this: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/estimates.html.
47. USDA Rural Development, Service Center Agencies Online Services, Multifamily Housing (MFH) 514 & 515 Property Data, available at USDA Service Center Agencies Online Services, https://www.sc.egov.usda.gov/data/MFH.html.
48. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Office of Foreign Labor Certification, Foreign Labor Certification Performance Data (H-2A Disclosure Data), available through the Performance Data Portal, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/performance.
49. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Data, available at ACS PUMS Data, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/microdata/access.html.
50. USDA Implements Farmworker Housing Occupancy for H-2A Visa Holders - Housing Assistance Council.



HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

1828 L Street NW
Suite 505
Washington DC 20036

202-842-8600
hac@ruralhome.org

www.ruralhome.org