

# Farmworkers Case Study

## Kern County, California

The San Joaquin Valley presents a portrait of modern agricultural production. The fields in the valley are historic, as is the role of the people who have worked in them. The experience of the farmworker population in Kern County mirrors the experience of farmworkers throughout the country in both its challenges and its opportunities. Despite the hardships of farmwork, migrants who work in the fields see the jobs as opportunities for advancement and a better way of life. Many migrants are able to achieve various levels of success; all face severe obstacles, including barriers to finding decent, safe, and affordable housing.

The San Joaquin Valley is the southern half of the Central Valley, which dominates the state of California. Kern County is situated at the southern tip of the San Joaquin, so that half of the county is within the valley and the other half is outside. In many ways, there are actually two Kern Counties. Outside the valley, including all of eastern Kern County, the terrain is mountainous and dry. To the south and immediate east of the valley are mountain ranges; to the far east is the Mojave Desert.

FIGURE 4.4



Despite the harsh environment, the eastern side of the county has a sizeable population and an economy driven by Edwards Air Force Base, the China Lake Naval Weapons Center, and the borax mines near Boron.

Life inside the valley features a combination of farmlands, oil fields, and cities. The valley is its own world, one that feels closer to Texas than to California. Even the culture is as close to the Great Plains as southern California, due to past migrations of residents from Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas.

Agriculture in Kern County is corporate-owned and large scale. Farmworkers reside in small towns rather than on family farms. The central presence of Bakersfield, combined with the high population densities of the farming towns, makes Kern County metropolitan by objective standards. Yet the life of farmworkers living in the small towns follows rural patterns. These contradictions run through the county as a whole and through the daily lives of its farmworkers.

Southern California is known for its Mediterranean-type climate, with warm and dry weather year-round. These conditions predominate in the Central Valley. The valley contains fertile soils but is lacking in the most essential factor for productive agriculture — water. Low year-round rainfall makes farming impossible without irrigation.

FIGURE 4.5

### Kern County Quick Facts, 2000

	Kern County	California
2000 Population	661,645	33,871,648
Population Change 1990-2000	21.4%	13.6%
Population Hispanic	38.4%	32.4%
Population African-American	6%	11.5%
Median Household Income	\$35,446	\$47,493
Female-Headed Households	14.5%	12.6%
Persons Below Poverty	20.8%	14.2%
Homeownership Rate	62.1%	56.9%
Cost Burdened	33.5%	36.4%
Crowded	15.0%	15.2%
Lacking Complete Plumbing	0.7%	0.7%
Lacking Complete Kitchen	0.9%	1.0%



*This one-room shack rents for \$350 per month.*

Due to its low annual rainfall, the San Joaquin Valley was first settled by U.S. pioneers only during the middle of the 19th century, when land grants were used to promote cattle and sheep ranching.

The shift to agricultural production in the valley required capital-intensive investments on a massive scale. Irrigated agriculture was established in the 1870s when the Southern Pacific Railroad and other companies developed rail lines, installed irrigation canals, and brought in an ample supply of farm labor. Throughout the decades, different groups have worked in the Kern County fields: Chinese, Japanese, Eastern Europeans, white farmers from the Great Plains region, Filipinos, and Mexicans. Historically, each population entered Kern County as farmworkers, then gradually moved into other industries, opening up farmwork opportunities for other groups.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1920s, migrants from the Great Plains states of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri moved to the San Joaquin Valley to work in the cotton fields and oil industry. The famous “Okie” migration, which reached its apex during the Great Depression, was immortalized in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and the photographs of Dorothea Lange.<sup>6</sup> Today, farmworkers in the valley are almost entirely of Hispanic heritage. During the 1960s, the United Farm Workers, led by Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Larry Itliong, used Kern County as their base of operations and source of core support.<sup>7</sup>

The Hispanic farmworker population in the valley has been extremely dynamic. A growing trend is the move away from year-round migrant labor to “resident” labor. The longer growing seasons in California allow farmworkers to reside in one area and find employment for much of the year. Other farmworkers have moved out of farm labor and into industries such as food packing

and processing, transportation, or the service economy. As farmworkers leave the fields, others move in to replace them, repeating the patterns that have dominated the valley since the 1870s.

## Population Characteristics

The Kern County population is 661,645. Twenty-one percent of the county’s population lives in poverty. In comparison, 14 percent of all California’s population is poor.

African Americans make up 6 percent of Kern County’s population, close to the state average of 6.7 percent. The African-American population is most centralized in the older neighborhoods of Bakersfield, especially the Lakeview/Cottonwood neighborhood in southeast Bakersfield.<sup>8</sup>

Hispanics comprise the largest minority group in the county, at 38.4 percent. Hispanic households are found throughout the older neighborhoods in Bakersfield. They also dominate the population of the small towns and unincorporated communities in the valley that have grown up around the agricultural economy. Rural towns, such as Arvin and Lamont, were once predominantly white, non-Hispanic communities, but are now predominantly Hispanic. Farmworkers and food processing workers live almost exclusively in rural towns such as Arvin, Lamont, and Wasco, while many of the Hispanics who are employed in the professional and service sectors of the economy live in these towns or in Bakersfield.

Residential segregation is severe throughout Kern County. Each community is either strongly non-Hispanic white or strongly Hispanic, many with over 80 percent or more of their population from one of these two groups (Figure 4.6). Bakersfield is the sole exception, with an overall population that is 51 percent non-Hispanic white, 32 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent African American. However, as noted above, Bakersfield’s neighborhoods remain segregated along lines that parallel the other communities in the county. The county-level figures represent an aggregation of data and do not reflect the conditions at the local level.

Since the 1990s, there has been an in-migration of farmworkers from new points of origin. Mixtecs, an indigenous group found in the Mexican state of Oaxaca with a distinct language and culture, are recent settlers in the valley. Immigrants from El Salvador and other Central American countries have also settled in the southern part of Kern County. Since these groups are relatively new to the valley, they lack the support networks that traditional Mexican immigrants have.

Six percent of the Kern County population and 16 percent of the county’s Hispanics indicate their ethnicity as “other Hispanic or Latino,” although ethnic groups other than those discussed here may be included in this category.

When discussing farmworker demographics, an important distinction must be made. While almost all of the farmworkers in Kern County are Hispanic, not all Hispanics living in Kern County are farmworkers. Therefore, this report will attempt to distinguish between the special needs of farmworkers as a class of workers and the special needs of Hispanics as an ethnic group. While these categories overlap considerably, they are not synonymous.

Migrant farmworkers in the U.S. follow three general patterns, or “streams,” in their annual labor migrations. Kern County, like the entire Central Valley, is part of the Western migrant stream, which encompasses seasonal migration from California to Oregon and Washington.

Since the 1990s, there has been a shift away from migratory labor and towards resident-based labor in the San Joaquin Valley. The extended growing season in the valley allows for more opportunities for year-round employment than in other farm regions. The 1995 Kern County Consolidated Plan states that there are 10,240 resident farmworkers in the county and 19,570 migrant workers during the peak season.<sup>9</sup> While these numbers favor seasonal migration, the number of permanent farmworkers has steadily increased and is expected to continue to grow.

Migrant and resident farmworkers constitute distinct populations, each with its own special needs. In many instances, migrant workers are experiencing the worst employment, job security, and housing conditions. Many migrants come to Kern County without a social support network and must locate both employment and housing on their own. Resident farmworkers, on the other hand, often have support networks in place and are more likely

to gain access to off-farm employment, such as in food packing or transportation. Farmworkers and recent immigrants to the U.S. are isolated from the mainstream and middle-class Hispanic population in the county. Class distinctions have developed within the county’s Hispanic population, as migrants who have lived in the U.S. for only a few years but have developed English language skills and have achieved even minimal economic success begin to identify less with newer migrants. As a result, farmworkers and recent migrants are kept on the periphery of the larger Hispanic culture in Kern County.<sup>10</sup>

A second major distinction within farmworker populations is between farmworker families and single men living by themselves. There has been a major transition in the San Joaquin Valley from single laborers working in the fields and sending money back to their families to farm labor families moving and residing together. In many cases, both husband and wife are employed, often in the same fields.<sup>11</sup>

### Economic Conditions

Total employment in Kern County is estimated at 249,700. Total farm employment is 60,300, or just under one-quarter of the total employment.<sup>12</sup> This number includes both seasonal and year-round employees. Many significant employers are large farms that employ over 2,000 workers each. The largest employment category is “service producing,”

**FIGURE 4.6**

#### Ethnic and Racial Population Distribution in Kern County

Kern County and Towns Inside the San Joaquin Valley, 2000

	Population	Race/Ethnicity by Percent		
		White*	Hispanic	African American
Kern County	661,645	49.5%	38.4%	6.0%
Bakersfield	247,057	51.1%	32.5%	9.2%
Lost Hills	1,938	2.6%	96.7%	2.8%
Weedpatch	2,726	8.5%	89.2%	0.7%
Lamont	13,296	9.2%	88.9%	2.6%
Arvin	12,956	9.8%	87.5%	1.1%
McFarland	9,618	10.2%	85.7%	3.2%
Mettler	157	15.3%	84.7%	0.0%
Delano	38,824	9.2%	68.5%	5.4%
Buttonwillow	1,266	25.0%	68.4%	3.8%
Shafter	12,736	29.0%	68.1%	1.6%
Wasco	21,263	21.6%	66.7%	10.3%
Taft	6,400	79.1%	15.5%	2.0%
Fellows	153	82.4%	14.4%	0.0%
Taft Heights	1,865	82.5%	13.1%	0.5%
Rosedale	8,445	83.3%	11.0%	1.2%
Oildale	27,885	84.9%	10.1%	0.3%
Dustin Acres	585	85.1%	10.3%	0.2%
Valley Acres	512	87.9%	7.4%	0.6%
McKittrick	160	88.1%	10.0%	0.0%
Derby Acres	376	90.2%	7.7%	0.0%
Tupman	227	91.2%	6.2%	0.4%

\* This column represents non-Hispanic persons.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed at County of Kern website, [www.co.kern.ca.us/econdev/maps/kerndpl.pdf](http://www.co.kern.ca.us/econdev/maps/kerndpl.pdf)

*Children in Kern County have limited access to parks and playgrounds and often must play near busy roads.*



which includes 160,500 employees. This category represents industries such as transportation, warehousing, communications, and utilities. A significant portion of the service producing sector is derived from agriculture-related jobs. In addition, 48,000 workers are employed at various levels of government, including local and state education.

Agricultural production in Kern County is over \$2.1 billion annually, a level that is third highest in the state and fourth highest in the nation, right behind Kern's fellow San Joaquin Valley counties of Fresno and Tulare.<sup>13</sup> The leading crops in Kern County are grapes, citrus fruits, almonds, cotton, milk, and carrots. Of these products, grapes are by far the leading commodity, with almost \$500 million in production in 2000, with citrus ranking second at under \$300 million.

Oil is also a core part of the Kern County economy. The oil economy was as important a factor as agriculture in the development of the San Joaquin Valley. At the turn of the 20th century, the Kern River field was producing 70 percent of California's oil and California was the country's leading oil state. Currently, Kern County produces 66 percent of California's, 10 percent of the nation's, and 1 percent of the world's crude oil, making it the leading oil-producing county in the continental United States. In addition, Kern County is the state's largest natural gas-producing region, with almost 60 percent of the state's production.<sup>14</sup>

The size of the agricultural and natural resource sectors in Kern County insulates the county from swings in the state's economy. The local economy is generally stable, without much economic expansion or contraction. The county did not suffer any ill effects from the 2001 recession, for instance. The only sector of the local economy that has experienced substantial growth since the mid-90s has been housing, with an increase in demand leading to higher rents, home prices, and land costs, and also higher rates of construction.

The median household income in Kern County is \$35,446 per year. Farmworkers are paid around \$5.50 per hour, and food packing workers are paid around the same. Truck drivers are paid on average \$6.50 an hour and retail sales staff earn \$6.20 per hour.<sup>15</sup> A single wage-earner household paid \$6.50 an hour would have an income of \$13,000; even with two wage-earners in a household, an income of \$26,000 is too low to purchase a median-priced home in Kern County.

The unemployment rate in Kern County is 11.3 percent. Despite this high rate, Kern County fares slightly better than neighboring counties. The average unemployment rate in the San Joaquin Valley is around 13 percent, while in the state of California it is 6 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Warehouses and distribution centers for large retailers are experiencing rapid growth in the county. One Kern County retailer's facility is its largest on the West Coast; another has established a warehouse with 3,000,000 square feet of space. The distribution facilities are being located at the southern tip of the valley, where there are few jobs outside of farmwork. Companies establishing these facilities have committed to hiring locally and are providing transportation from traditional farm-labor towns such as Arvin and Lamont. The warehouse jobs offer year-round employment, better pay, and better working conditions for farmworkers, opening up new opportunities for them.

## Housing Conditions

### Housing Characteristics

Housing styles in Kern County are consistent with those in much of California: single-family, detached houses are the norm. Like other Californians, Kern County residents prefer single-level ranch homes. The age and size of housing stock varies within the county, but for working-class families, houses are generally older, modest in size, and on relatively small lots. Kern County is experiencing a growth in the housing market,



*Many farmworkers in Kern County live in vacation campers serving as “mobile homes” in trailer parks.*

with much of the new construction in larger homes above 2,000 square feet and for above-average prices. Like growth in many parts of the country, this housing growth is taking place in new communities on the outskirts of older neighborhoods. These high-growth neighborhoods are predominantly composed of middle- to upper-income households. Low- and moderate-income families live in older communities within Bakersfield and in the small towns that dot the valley.

Farmworkers may own their homes, but the majority are renters. Farmworker housing options for either rental or purchase are generally small single-family homes and mobile homes. Other options include a limited amount of multifamily housing (garden-style apartments) and an even more limited number of farm labor camps for migrant farmworkers. The housing available to farmworkers is often older units, which typically are smaller than comparable newly constructed homes. In addition, while their housing quality may be within the standards for housing codes, older homes are more likely to need repairs.

The median home sales price in Bakersfield is \$94,000. Smaller towns throughout the valley have similar housing price ranges within the \$90,000s. Rents for the units occupied by farmworkers vary considerably. A small house or mobile home typically rents for between \$450 and \$500 a month. A camper, a one-room shack, or other substandard housing often rents for \$350 a month. Housing costs increase during the peak agricultural season, due to both the increased demand and the ability of predatory landlords to take advantage of new immigrants with limited English-language skills and limited abilities to gauge the rental market. A household with a single wage-earner making \$5.50 an hour would have to pay 48 percent of its gross income to afford a \$450 unit and would be cost-burdened.<sup>17</sup>

It is common for two families to reside in a single-family house or mobile home, and it is not uncommon for three families to reside in the same unit for an extended period of time. Fifteen percent of households in Kern County are overcrowded, although this figure may not capture the higher frequency of crowding that occurs during the peak agricultural season.

The 1995 Kern County Consolidated Plan notes that mobile homes represent 10 percent of the housing stock. Mobile homes appear to be used predominantly for rental, rather than ownership purposes. Mobile homes in the farm towns are generally “single-wide” models in mobile home parks. At the extreme end of the spectrum are vacation campers that have been converted into rental units. Despite their small size and unsuitability for long-term residential use, campers often house entire families. Single-wide mobile homes are similar to single-family dwellings in that they are often crowded with two (or more) families per unit. Many of the mobile homes are older stock and need rehabilitation. The resale value of mobile homes in the county is low, making them a poor vehicle for asset-building.

Living conditions in converted campers are substandard in almost every case. Families living in these units are still better off, however, than those occupying the housing of last resort in Kern County. All too often, renters occupy makeshift housing, including converted garages or abandoned properties. These units lack water, electricity, heating/cooling, and sometimes cooking facilities. In many cases, the garage on a property is converted to housing, with the occupants of the house running a hose to provide water and an extension cord to provide electricity to the garage occupants.

These living conditions do not just represent isolated cases. Entire neighborhoods and even entire towns have high levels of substandard housing. The remote town of Lost Hills is a case in point. Its isolated location, miles from the neighboring town, and its resident base of mostly first-generation immigrants has allowed its problems to grow in relative anonymity. In addition, the town has almost no businesses and no amenities of any kind.<sup>18</sup> The living conditions in Lost Hills mirror, on a smaller scale, those of the borderlands colonias. Dedicated community activists are working with public and nonprofit housing organizations to address housing need in Lost Hills.

## Infrastructure

A vexing problem for the smaller towns in Kern County is the scarcity of water and sewer resources to support new units. In February 2002, development of an affordable housing project in Lamont had to be

*Housing developments supported by nonprofits and public agencies provide decent and safe facilities for children.*



postponed for at least a year and possibly more because the local public utility district was unable to provide sewer services. In small towns and unincorporated communities like Lamont, the current population has local water districts operating at or near capacity. Both the lack of water, due to the environment, and the lack of infrastructure, due to costs, contribute to the problem. The costs of expanding water and sewer services, in both time and money, add greatly to the expense of construction.

Another limitation to subsidized housing is that for a family to be eligible, at least one member must be a legal resident. There are many families in Kern County with housing need who meet this condition, but there are many who do not. Even families with legal residency are often reluctant to seek government assistance. Many families excluded from subsidized housing are forced to live in substandard conditions.

### Seasonality

There is a limited supply of affordable housing stock for farmworker and other very low-income families throughout Kern County. Lack of housing options is the primary cause of crowding. The problems associated with limited housing stock and crowding are exacerbated during the peak agricultural seasons, when almost 20,000 farmworkers move to Kern County.<sup>19</sup> This number does not include family members of seasonal workers who are not engaged in agriculture (dependent children, for instance). The smaller towns that dot the valley and house the settled farmworkers lack the capacity to handle this influx, as do the two government-provided seasonal farm labor camps, which have 180 units combined. Even with the availability of substandard units, some farmworkers are unable to find housing, live in crowded conditions, and become homeless, sleeping in cars or on the streets.<sup>20</sup>

Winter in the San Joaquin Valley is shorter than in other parts of the county, but there is still a significant

period of the year without farm employment. In Kern County, the months from December to February are the off-season. During this time settled farmworkers must meet constant costs of living with decreased incomes. Farmworkers use temporary employment, savings, or public support to meet rent, food, and other costs.

### Quality of Life Issues

The small towns in Kern County's corner of the San Joaquin Valley offer few goods and services. Most towns' main streets include small stores and other retailers, although the smallest and most remote of these towns lack any businesses. Residents in these towns rely on the gas stations at highway intersections for their daily necessities. Shoppers who live in these towns must go to Bakersfield in order to purchase consumer durables or other large items. In these instances lack of transportation hurts many families. Those without transportation can rely on labor contractors for access to the fields. On the weekends, however, they are completely isolated except for the assistance of family and friends.

The lack of amenities includes a lack of facilities for children to play. Without recreational facilities, children play in neighborhood streets, in open fields shared by abandoned cars and broken glass, or by the sides of busy roads. Often, parents are reluctant to let their children play outside, fearing hazardous conditions and street crime. Housing units supported by government and nonprofits, along with schools and childcare providers, are addressing the need for amenities, providing safe and decent facilities for children.

Farmworkers face health problems related to their environment and their socioeconomic status. Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is poor; pollution drifting from the San Francisco Bay area combines with emissions from road traffic and the oil industry and pesticides from the fields. Children in Kern County have high rates of asthma, bronchitis, and other respiratory ailments.<sup>21</sup>

## Significant Developments

### The Role of Education

Many farmworker families see education as vital for their children to achieve better jobs and better lives. The majority of new immigrants in Kern County enroll their children in the public schools as soon as possible.<sup>22</sup>

Success in primary education opens opportunities for higher education. California State University, Bakersfield, has initiated the College Assistance Migrant Program, which offers pre-college transition and first-year support services for students with migrant and seasonal farming backgrounds.

The public school system in Kern County plays a key role in providing farmworker families with access to social support networks. Often the schools are the only interface farmworkers have with government. Social support agencies in the county have turned this limitation into an advantage, using parents' involvement with their children's education to reach out to parents. The nonprofit Kern County Network for Children, through its Community Collaboratives network of organizations, is active throughout small towns in the valley, providing support services such as health care to families. The 21 local Community Collaboratives in the county are rooted in the public schools and base their methods on community participation. They have been successful, not only in getting farmworkers to participate, but also in helping farmworker families to prioritize their needs and concerns, and working to address them. In many of Kern County's towns, school-centered community groups are the only means of reaching farmworker families — especially new immigrants — and empowering them to participate in a community.



*Rural Development's Section 502 program, which provided a mortgage for the owners of this house, is an important part of efforts to provide quality housing to farmworkers in Kern County.*

### Affordable Housing

Housing agencies and nonprofits are also reaching out to the farmworker community. Housing providers, such as the Kern County public housing authority and Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), a local nonprofit housing developer, conduct outreach campaigns to inform farmworkers (as well as others) of the housing options they provide. Other organizations, such as the UFW and California Rural Legal Assistance, educate farmworkers on tenant-landlord issues. In some cases, this outreach is done individually. In other cases, these groups work with the Community Collaboratives to reach farmworkers. Employers in Kern County help as well. SHE has had positive experiences with some employers allowing SHE representatives to speak to workers on the job.

There have been strong efforts to meet the county's needs for decent and affordable housing. While only a few housing projects specifically target farmworkers, all serve low- and moderate-income households. Although exact numbers are unavailable, a large proportion of the families served by these projects are farmworkers.<sup>23</sup> The Kern County public housing authority provides both Section 8 vouchers and public housing for county residents. The public housing authority has approximately 400 Section 8 vouchers. The Section 8 fair market rents are competitive in the county, and the voucher program has a 95 percent lease-up rate. The public housing developments in Kern County are also successful, with over 150 public housing units. The director of the public housing authority made the case that public housing does work in rural areas and rural public housing is without the crime and mismanagement problems that are typically believed to plague such projects.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Rural Development (RD) office is extremely active in Kern County, providing both single-family and multifamily housing. The small towns in the valley come under RD's jurisdiction, as do unincorporated communities that border the larger cities. As of January 2002, RD had financed 950 single-family homes in the county through the Section 502 and 504 programs and 1,587 multifamily housing units through the Section 515 program.<sup>24</sup> RD works in collaboration with the public housing authority and the State of California to provide migrant farmworker labor camps; it also works with SHE to provide single-family self-help housing.



*After completing work on their homes, self-help families focus on landscaping.*

There are two publicly run migrant camps in Kern County, providing 180 units between them. These camps are owned, operated, and funded through a partnership between USDA Rural Development, the State of California, and the Kern County public housing authority. Units at the migrant camps rent for \$7.50 a day for a two-bedroom unit and \$8.50 a day for a four-bedroom unit. The Shafter camp was renovated in 2000 and provides high-quality accommodations for seasonal workers, both families and individuals. In 2002, the Sunset camp began similar renovations. The Sunset camp's history mirrors the valley's, as it was established to house "Okie" migrants during the Great Depression and served as the setting for several of Steinbeck's works.

Self-help housing has been successful in the valley. SHE has completed several self-help developments in Kern County, with funding for self-help provided by USDA Rural Development's Section 502 program and HUD's Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program (SHOP). Families are able to participate in these programs even with low incomes; RD staff are confident that their Section 502 loans provide enough subsidies to offset farmworkers' low income levels.<sup>25</sup> Self-help developments are highly regarded in their communities and the success of SHE's self-help developments has helped it avoid NIMBY problems that sometimes accompany affordable housing efforts.<sup>26</sup>

Rents in multifamily housing are sometimes supported through Section 8 vouchers or USDA Rural Development rental assistance. The costs to low-income families of single-family homeownership are likewise sometimes subsidized by public agencies. For instance, a family of four earning up to \$20,150 is eligible for RD's very low-income programs and one earning up to

\$32,250 is eligible for RD's low-income programs. The reality is that individual farmworkers seldom earn more than \$11,000 a year.

Some multifamily developments address more than housing need for their residents. These projects, including the Shafter migrant camp, provide childcare services and recreational facilities. Many projects provide other forms of assistance as well. Based on the quality of the housing, the cost of the housing, and the amenities and services provided, the publicly assisted affordable housing is the best housing for low- and moderate-income families in Kern County.

The greatest limitation to expanding affordable multifamily housing in Kern County continues to be funding, especially for new construction. USDA Rural Development provides important funding for this effort, and the State of California is an active funding source. Housing providers rely on Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) as the backbone of construction financing. LIHTC financing may be used in conjunction with other sources, such as bond financing, as affordable-level rents are unable to pay the debt service for bonds. A major challenge with the LIHTC program is the limited funding. There are often twice as many applications for tax credits in the state as credits available. Providers believe that if the tax credits were readily available, they could produce twice as many units a year.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, tax credits, by themselves, are insufficient to reach low-income families, including farmworkers. Additional funding is necessary to support subsidies for low-income families.

## Conclusion

Farmworkers in Kern County are continuing the traditions of the past. For many, farmwork is the first rung on the ladder of economic opportunity, a ladder that many immigrants, after much hard work, are able to climb. Economic growth in the county is due to diversification, opening up other opportunities for farmworkers. Unfortunately, not all farmworkers are able to achieve success. In addition, a great many farmworkers face employers, landlords, and others who take advantage of their economic and social isolation to exploit them. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the economy is to produce new housing that meets the needs of low- and moderate-income families. Fortunately, there is a strong network of public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and individual activists in Kern County who are able to help farmworkers achieve their dreams.