



Center for Worker Health

Wake Forest School of Medicine

POLICY BRIEF

Migrant Farmworker Housing Violations in North Carolina

Summary

Migrant farmworkers endure some of the worst housing conditions in North Carolina. Federal and state laws set minimum standards for migrant worker housing. In the largest and most comprehensive study of farmworker housing conducted in the Southeast, researchers at Wake Forest School of Medicine found multiple violations of state and federal housing standards in every camp they studied.

Farmworkers face significant hazards at work, such as heat stress, pesticide exposure, and injuries. The housing provided to migrant farmworkers may create added health and safety risks. Violations were more common in camps that lacked a current “Certificate of Inspection” posted by the NC Department of Labor (NCDOL). Violations were more common later in the growing season. The researchers suggested that the NC Department of Labor increase its inspections of farmworker housing, and inspect housing later in the growing season in order to catch serious problems.

What did the researchers do?

From June–October, 2010, the researchers studied 183 migrant farmworker camps in 16 North Carolina counties.

The study had three parts.

1. Researchers questioned two workers in each camp about housing.
2. Researchers used the NCDOL’s guidelines to inspect each camp. One worker helped with each inspection.
3. The researchers took water samples in each camp. The water samples were tested in state-certified labs to check for human waste.

The three workers who helped with the study in each camp received \$30 for assisting the researchers with data collection.



Cardboard on floor provided as bed in a North Carolina migrant farmworker camp.

MIGRANT FARMWORKER HOUSING VIOLATIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Research paper cited in this Policy Brief:

Arcury et al. 2012. Migrant Farmworker Housing Regulation Violations in North Carolina. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*. Vol 55. Pp. 191-204.

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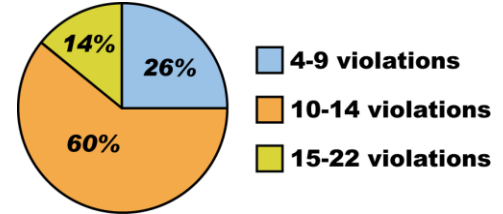
What did they find?

The researchers found at least 4 housing violations in every camp they studied. Nearly 3/4 of the camps had more than 10 violations, and some camps had as many as 22. Violations found in farmworker camps included:

- **serious infestations with roaches, mice and rats**
- **toilets not working**
- **showers not working**
- **polluted drinking water**
- **no fire escape and no smoke alarms**

Three main factors were related to better camp conditions:

1. **State inspections.** Violations were less common in camps that had a current "Certificate of Inspection" posted by the NCDOL.
2. **Workers with visas.** Violations were less common in camps that housed workers with H-2A visas.
3. **Early in the season.** Violations were less common when the camps were inspected early in the growing season.



Number of violations found per housing site (183 sites)

Why does it matter?

The houses in which migrant farmworkers live place them at increased risk for injury (e.g., from fire and falls), and illness (e.g., from polluted water, diseases carried by rodents, lack of showers). These houses do not meet the minimum standards set by state and federal regulations. Poor housing conditions increase the hazards faced by this low income and vulnerable group of workers.

Recommendations

In order to improve health and safety in farm worker housing, the authors provide three recommendations:

1. Farms that employ migrant farmworkers should not be exempt from health and safety regulations that commonly protect other workers.
2. The NCDOL should inspect more farmworker camps. They may need to employ more inspectors, and increase fines to motivate employers to fix housing problems.
3. The NCDOL should review the current farmworker housing regulations to find out whether they are working as intended.

Further Reading

Past studies of this issue have used surveys and interviews with workers. They have also looked into the conditions in farmworker housing and how they relate to health:

Housing Assistance Council. 2001. No Refuge from the Fields: Findings from a Survey of Farmworker Housing Conditions in the United States. Washington, DC: Housing Assistance Council.

Ziebarth, A. 2006. Housing seasonal workers for the Minnesota processed vegetable industry. Rural Sociology. Vol 71, pp 335-357.

Vallejos et al. 2011. Migrant farmworkers' housing characteristics across an agricultural season in North Carolina. American Journal of Industrial Medicine. Vol 54, pp 533-544.

Definition of Terms:

Exposure – Contact with something by swallowing, breathing, or touching the skin or eyes. Exposure may be short-term or long-term.

Hazard – A situation that poses a threat to life, health, property or the environment.

Migrant – An individual, and his/her dependents, who is employed in agricultural employment of a seasonal or other temporary nature, and who is required to be absent overnight from his/her permanent place of residence.

NCDOL – The NC Department of Labor is the agency responsible for enforcing labor laws and regulations in North Carolina.

H-2A Visa – A visa for agricultural workers from other countries that allows those workers to work for a particular employer for a temporary period of time.

Violation – An offense in which the person who owned or provided the housing was not following federal or state laws.