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# Storms, Floods, and COVID-19 Have Worsened Long-standing Farmworker Housing Challenges

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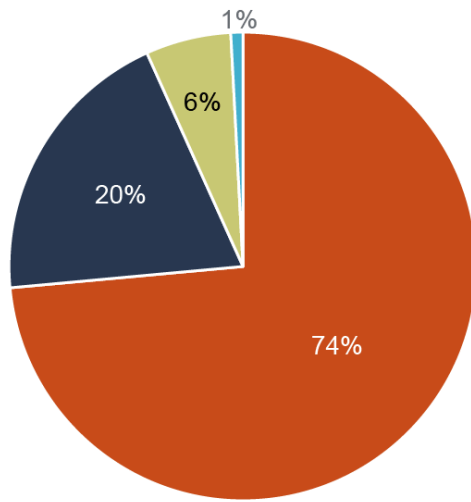
California's housing crisis is widespread, but farmworkers face especially serious challenges. Low wages, seasonal and often unstable employment, and housing stock that is often in poor condition make farmworkers a "special needs" population. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, farm employees were more likely than any other group of essential workers to be living in crowded housing. This made it difficult to mitigate the spread of the virus. Over this winter and spring, farmworkers—and their housing—were hit hard by a series of severe storms. These historic events have highlighted and worsened a difficult housing situation.

In the early part of the pandemic, when no one was immune to the coronavirus, crowded living conditions made quarantining difficult. Housing for the Harvest, a county-run program, offered farmworkers quarantine options combined with wraparound services and financial assistance. It served about 4,600 agricultural workers by the end of 2021, plus additional workers in its final six months. For many, however, the need to work and take care of family took precedence. One study found that over half of farmworkers interviewed in Monterey County reported working through COVID-19 symptoms.

Now, as the pandemic threat recedes, farmworkers are facing new housing challenges. A series of atmospheric river storms breached levees across the state, inundating the farmworker community of Pajaro, and returning Tulare Lake to the Central Valley. Flooding in the valley is expected to worsen as the historic snowpack melts. This inundation could affect farmworker communities in two ways: directly, by damaging homes and/or triggering the evacuations of thousands, and indirectly, by flooding fields and idling workers. Both the National Agricultural Workers Survey and a recent UC Merced study show that a large majority of farmworkers are renters rather than owners, and covering rent—and other essential living expenses—is likely to be harder with less work available.

## About three-quarters of farmworkers rent their housing

■ Rent ■ Own ■ Free housing through work ■ Other



**SOURCE:** Weighted averages from National Agricultural Workers Survey, fiscal years 2018–2020.  
**FROM:** PPIC Blog, April 2023.

Last week, the governor secured a [Presidential Major Disaster Declaration](#) from the federal government, which will bring support from FEMA to storm-affected counties. [More than half of California’s immigrant farmworkers are undocumented](#), and may not qualify for federal disaster aid. California’s Department of Social Services is charged with providing relief to these individuals and communities.

While recent crises have added to the housing woes of California’s farmworkers, the [high cost of housing](#) has long been an unsolved problem for these and other low-income Californians. Housing solutions tend not to be fast or easy, but state policymakers—and [some local government coalitions](#)—are recognizing that they are as sorely needed in California’s agricultural communities as they are in its cities.

### TOPICS

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