

Vermont Migrant Dairy Farmworker Housing Brief

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Vermont farms depend on migrant labor. Fruit and vegetable farms are able to hire seasonal foreign migrant labor through the H2A visa program. This option is not available for dairy farms, which are year-round operations excluded from the H2A program and for whom there is no alternative that would enable them to meet labor shortages through a visa program.

Farmworker housing, a perennial challenge in US agriculture, is made more difficult for migrant dairy farmworkers because migrant workers face risks from immigration enforcement when they travel off the farm, and because without the farmworker housing inspections associated with a legal visa program, such as those required as part of the H2A visa, housing standards are not typically enforced. For dairy farmers, years of milk prices at or below the cost of production has steadily driven farms out of business and left remaining farms with little cash to invest in housing .

This paper summarizes findings from 4 research studies conducted between 2010 and 2019 that interviewed Vermont dairy farmers and migrant Spanish-speaking farmworkers (see Table 1). Dairy farms interviewed included only those farms that hired non-family labor. These studies considered a range of issues related to dairy farm labor, and this report draws from that work to focus on housing issues and needs of migrant dairy farmworkers. It concludes with recommendations to improve farmworker housing quality.

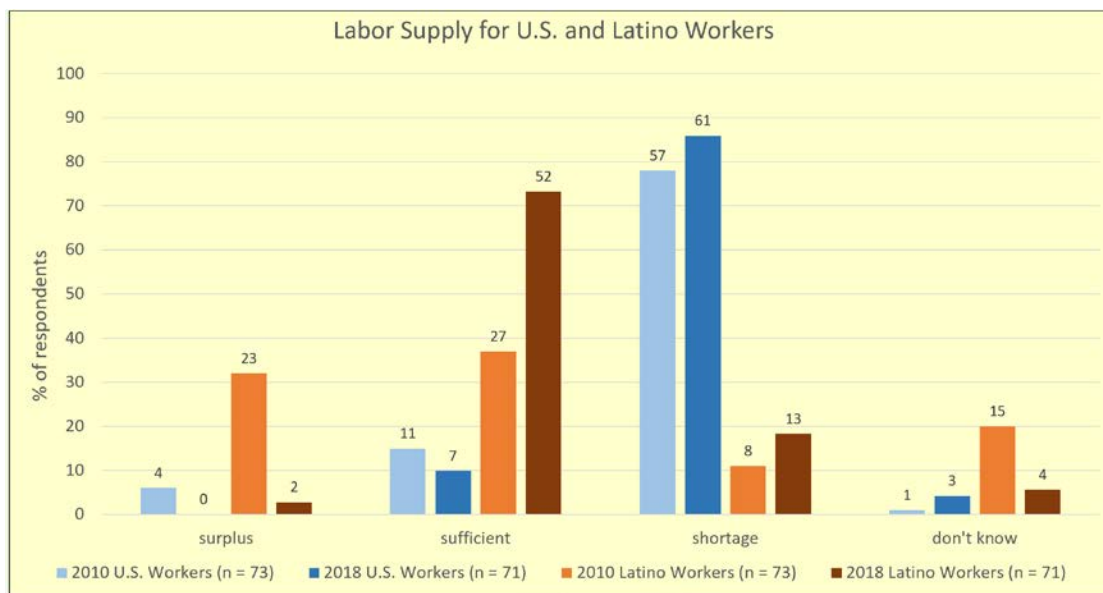
Table 1:

Dairy Farmer Interviews		
2010	73 farms statewide	
2018	71 farms statewide	
Latino Dairy Farmworker Interviews		
2016	173 Latino Farmworkers	116 unique farms
2018/2019	67 Latino Farmworkers	40 unique farms

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The need for migrant dairy workers

Vermont dairy farmers have hired foreign-born, Spanish-speaking Latinx migrant workers in response to a long-term labor shortage. Employment of Latinx workers began between 2000 and 2010 and has increased since then. In 2010, 78% of farms surveyed reported a shortage of US workers, rising to 86% in 2018. Of the 586 non-family full-time farmworkers employed by farmers interviewed in 2018, 57% were Latinx workers. Despite significant and challenging language barriers, farmers overall have had very good experience with Latinx workers, with over 90% indicating a "very good" or "good" experience in 2010 (n=42) and over 80% indicating the same in 2018 (n=68).



Demographics

Estimates of the total number of Spanish-speaking migrant workers and families in Vermont range from 800 (Erin Shea, UVM Extension) to 1500 (Migrant Justice / Milk with Dignity). Most Spanish-speaking migrant dairy workers are young men from Mexico. Out of 173 respondents in 2016 the majority were from Mexico (88.4%), while 11.0% were Guatemalan. Of these, 95% were male and 75% were between 18 and 34 years old. Nearly 20% lived with a spouse or partner and 20% of parents were living with their children. The length of time Latinx workers report typically staying at a farm job has increased in recent years, from a median of 24 months in 2016 to 36 months in 2018/19.

Housing as part of farmworker compensation

Housing is one of the most common non-wage benefits dairy farmers provide to their employees. Latinx workers are much more likely to live in farmer-provided housing than US workers. All farms that employed Latinx workers provided housing and utilities as part of their compensation package. For comparison, only 62% of farms provided housing to US workers and 53% included utilities.

Housing is one of the most common non-wage benefits provided to workers on dairy farms	
Latino Workers	Housing & Utilities provided by 100% of farms Farmer estimated median annual value per worker: \$4,367 Maximum: \$3,200 Minimum: \$1,167
U.S. Workers	Housing provided by 62% of farms; Utilities provided by 53% of farms Farmer estimated median annual value per worker: \$14,100 Maximum: \$14,100 Minimum: \$3,300

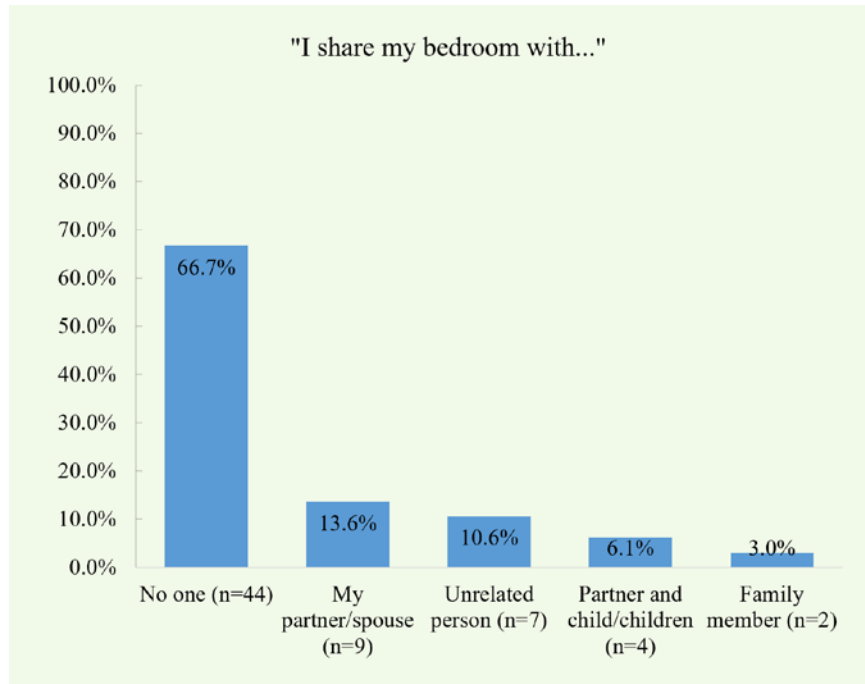
Latinx workers satisfaction with their housing varied widely. For the majority of workers, housing was either not stressful or caused only low levels of stress. However, for about a third of Latinx farmworkers the quality of their housing was a significant cause of stress, with 11% reporting it caused them extreme stress in 2016. Of 173 dairy workers surveyed on 116 farms, 15 farms (13%) had at least one worker reporting extreme stress, and 43 farms (37%) had at least one worker reporting moderate or extreme stress.

The ability of farmers to address housing deficiencies is limited on many farms. Financial stress was noted by some farmers in interviews in 2018. One farmer, for example, noted that they knew their housing was inadequate and they wanted to repair or replace it, but they simply did not have the money. Another farmer said they'd had good farmworker housing down the road from the farm, and that Latinx workers had previously lived there and driven a tractor back to work on the farm. However, concerns over immigration enforcement had led them to build an apartment in the barn instead.

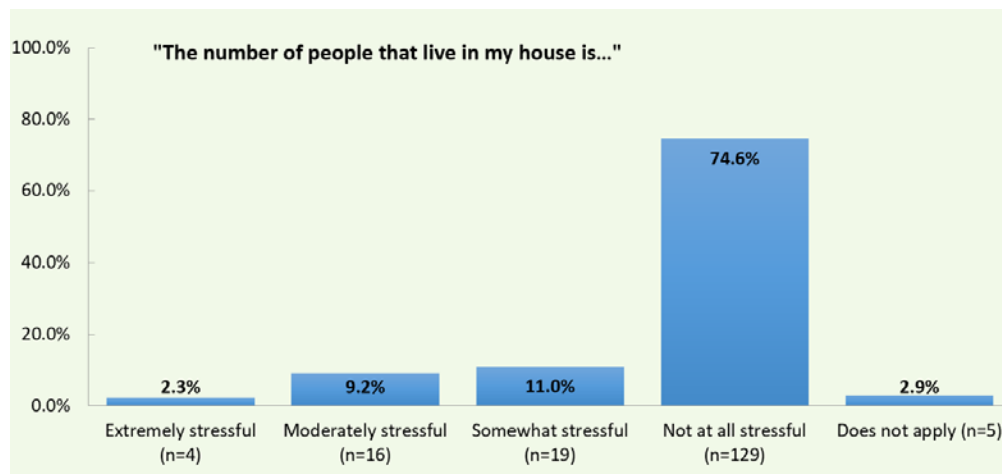
Housing Density

Housing density in the 2018/19 survey of farmworkers (n=66) ranged from 1 to 9 persons per household, with a median of 4 and a range from 1 to 9 persons per household. The average farmworker dwelling had an average of 3.7 bedrooms, ranging from 1 to 7 per household. About 2/3 of workers had their own bedroom and 23% shared a bedroom with a member of their family

or a relative. One indicator that crowding is an issue in some farmworker housing is that more than 1 in 10 farmworkers surveyed in 2018 had a to share a bedroom with an unrelated person.



Density is more complicated issue than it may first appear. Overcrowding was a stressor for about 11% respondents in 2016. However, in both recent farmworker surveys in 2016 and 2018/19, the number of people living in the dwelling was not stressful for most respondents. There may be several factors involved in this issue. Social isolation is a significant source of stress for many Spanish-speaking workers. Shared spaces with shared language and culture may offer a respite from life in Vermont. Importantly, many farmworkers have relatives among those living in their house, further creating a sense of community in the dwelling. Living with family, however, does not alleviate crowding issues in some housing. For example, in 2018 one worker said *“Five family members live in the house. We are a lot of people in a small trailer and there is no privacy. We were 7 people in the trailer, with 5 beds and a couch and that was stressful because you sleep in the living room and wake up when someone is in the kitchen. It should be 1 person per room. Right now there are 3 sleeping in the other room.”*



COVID, Density and Farmworker Housing

It is critically important to note that these surveys were done prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and COVID raises several current concerns. First, farmworker housing that is crowded presents opportunities for COVID to spread rapidly. If this were to happen, finding alternative housing to quarantine workers who have tested positive or who are ill would be challenging for many farms. Exacerbating this issue is that housing workers off the farm exposes those workers to increased immigration enforcement, a particular concern in Vermont's northern dairy counties.

Developing farm and community plans that protect healthy employees and provide space for those testing positive to quarantine is a current issue needed to limit the spread of COVID-19 this Winter and Spring.

Housing Quality:

In 2016 about 18% of workers said that the conditions of bathrooms were either moderately or extremely stressful (n=173). However, the UVM survey research touched only briefly on housing quality. Anecdotally, workers noted a range of other concerns in different homes, including heating systems, kitchen issues, and ventilation.

Interviews with farmers also heard comments on housing quality, with several farmers raising concerns about a lack of housekeeping and lack of care for the housing that workers were provided. Some of these issues may be related to communication and language challenges, for example one farmer noted that workers had plumbing issues because they'd been discarding paper towels in the toilet. In other cases, farmers noted their workers were young men who may not have had that much experience managing household chores. Shared living spaces between unrelated individuals presents additional obligations and strains as workers need to agree and coordinate on housecleaning, something that works well on some farms and less so on others. Farmers note they sometimes feel in a bind about housekeeping in workers housing, wanting to ensure the housing is maintained and cleaned, and also needing to respect workers' rights to privacy and independence in their dwellings.

Opportunities, Recommendations & Questions

While most Latino farmworkers report housing to be adequate, for more than 1/3 of Latino dairy workers housing is a significant cause of stress. The following recommendations outline some strategies and opportunities for improving the quality and stock of farmworker housing.

Opportunity: Formalizing a Farmworker Housing Working Group

Farmworker and volunteer Buster Caswell has been advocating for the creation of a formal working group or task force to focus on farmworker housing. There are several hopeful signs for this initiative. First, there are clear indications that there is a broad range of stakeholders interested in addressing this issue. At the last farmworker housing meeting in November 2020 there were 19 separate organizations & agencies in attendance ranging from farmworker advocates to housing agencies to representatives from state and federal agencies. Since that meeting additional organizations have expressed interest. This suggests the time is ripe to formalize a multi-sector farm labor housing working group, including both farmer and farmworker representatives, to expand recommendations and options.

The recently released Vermont Agriculture & Food Systems Strategic Plan has adopted a collaborative model that could be a guide for this housing group. The Plan's approach includes developing a common agenda, working on mutually reinforcing activities, encouraging regular and frequent communication and adopting a system for measuring progress toward goals. It also identifies a central organizing agency to implement the plan, and details funding needs. Notably, while the Plan makes several suggestions connected to farmworker housing, outside of land use regulations it does not go into detail about the specifics of addressing these housing issues. This presents an opportunity for this housing group to fill that need.

Recommendation: Formalize a farmworker housing group tasked with compiling existing data, identifying needs and developing strategy to improve this housing stock.

Questions:

- ❖ Does the farmworker housing group require a central point of contact/organizing lead agency?
- ❖ If so, what agencies or organizations are in the best position to serve as the lead organizer for this housing group?
- ❖ Does this central coordinating organization have resources to staff and manage this, or is additional funding needed?

Opportunity: Research Needs

There is widespread concern about the quantity and quality of farmworker housing in Vermont, particularly for those farmworkers outside established programs like H2A. However, the extent

and type of housing needs, the costs to repair, sources of funding and strategies to correct problems is poorly understood. Our research on migrant dairy workers found about a 1/3 of workers reported significant stress related to housing. This is an indicator of need, but far from the detail needed to design, fund and implement a program.,

Recommendation: Develop a more detailed understanding of challenges facing farmworker housing is needed.

Questions:

- ❖ Knowledge “silos” exist between organizations and individuals that have knowledge but have not had incentives, or a forum, to share their data on farmworker housing. How could information sharing be encouraged and facilitated?
- ❖ What are the particular structural deficiencies present in Vermont farmworker housing?
 - What share of deficient housing would require construction or replacement of entire buildings?
 - What share of deficiencies could be addressed through lower-cost repairs or renovations?
 - What are the estimated costs for these repairs, replacements or new construction?
 - How can both the availability of on-farm housing and off-farm farmworker housing be improved?
 - What combination of funding options are available for farmers wanting to improve housing for their employees?
- ❖ Several programs have been initiated in Vermont that encourage farmers to adopt practices in return for compensation, including funding to improve farmworker housing, for example Caring Dairy and Milk with Dignity. Outside evaluation of the success and challenges of these programs should be conducted to understand how well they’re working and areas for improvement.

Opportunity: Renovation or Replacement of Farmworker Housing

It’s evident that there is a substantial need to improve farmworker housing in Vermont, including options for both on-farm and off-farm employee housing barriers include financial constraints faced by farmers, complex applications processes, the need for assistance with cost share, and challenges housing undocumented workers.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Identify and assist with funding and incentives that encourage farmers to improve farmworker housing.

- ❖ Provide expanded technical assistance to farmers seeking to apply for grants to improve farmworker housing.
- ❖ Where existing programs that provide funding to improve farmworker housing, e.g. Milk With Dignity are having success from both farmworker and farmer perspectives, build an expand that success.
- ❖ Programs that could assist with housing repair and that are also integrated into other societal goals should be considered in the context of farm labor housing. Examples include:
 - Youthbuild - an alternative education model that provides youth with a path to a high school diploma, alongside job training, outside of the classroom.
 - Weatherization - Vermont's weatherization program is well established and could be promoted to farmers seeking to improve energy efficiency and comfort in their employees housing.
- ❖ Several years ago there was a concerted effort to incentivize farmers to adopt energy-efficient employee housing, notably zero energy manufactured homes like the Vermod. Identifying and marketing affordable, high energy efficiency homes to farmers would improve housing stock while also assisting Vermont in reducing carbon emissions.

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