

POLICY BRIEF: EAST COACHELLA VALLEY HOUSING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing in the East Coachella Valley does not meet the needs of the permanent or seasonal populations. It is unaffordable, overcrowded and substandard. Due to lack of planning, housing is also located near environmental risks. There is a need to address the housing needs of not only the migrant farm worker population but also low-income rural residents overall. There are programs in place to assist low-income populations. However, these programs are underfunded and under-utilized. Low-cost alternatives for rehabilitation of existing housing and development of new housing should be sought. At the same time, standards should be enforced in a manner that does not push residents into worse housing or homelessness.

STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

Livable housing in the East Coachella Valley is unaffordable, crowded substandard and poorly located.

Expense

One common way quantify the expense of housing is through a measure call “cost burden.” This measure is based on a household spending more than 30% of its income on housing costs, including utilities. When a household spends this level on housing, less money is available for other necessities, putting low-income families at risk. Cost burden is more common among renters in Riverside County but is also a concern among owners. According to the 2000 census, 44% of Riverside County renter-occupied households were cost-burdened. “Severe cost burden is projected to continue to affect approximately two-thirds of extremely low-income households. Large families with extremely low incomes experience the most severe incidence of cost burden.”ⁱ In the East Coachella Valley, up to **50% of renters and 61% of owners** pay more than **50% of their income** on housing costs. This is considered an extreme cost burden. According to the 2000 census, 44% of Riverside County renter occupied households were cost burdened as defined by spending 30% of income on housing costs.

Overcrowding

The most common measure of overcrowding is persons-per-room in a dwelling unit. In the 2000 census, the last census for which we have direct data, California measured 15% of dwellings being crowded while the US as a whole had a percentage of 5.7.ⁱⁱ These same data show that in Riverside County, among all renters, the overcrowding percentage was almost 18%. The data from the 2010 American Communities Surveyⁱⁱⁱ shows overcrowding in the East Coachella Valley ranging from 15-35% of rental dwellings. The fact that residences are overcrowded indicates a failure in the housing market to provide housing that is both affordable and of adequate size for the residents. It results in rapid wear and tear on housing and may impact health and safety of residents. In the case of large households (five or more members) in the

Substandard

If a housing unit endangers the life, health, property, safety or welfare of either the residents or the public, it is considered “substandard.” This may include inadequate sanitation facilities, structural hazards, poor protection from weather, fire hazards, poor maintenance, overcrowding, dangerous wiring, inadequate plumbing and other indicators. Ten percent of housing in Riverside County is considered substandard. Some of these housing units were built under old building codes, do not meet codes, or have aged to deterioration. The 2000 census indicates that 81,627 housing units in Riverside County were built before 1960. Countywide, 3,407 housing units lack kitchen facilities and 2,360 lack complete plumbing;. These units are disproportionately occupied by minority renters, specifically Hispanic renters.^{iv} Advocates estimate that the rates of substandard housing in the Eastern Coachella Valley would be closer to 50%, although no specific statistics are available.

Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers: A Special Population

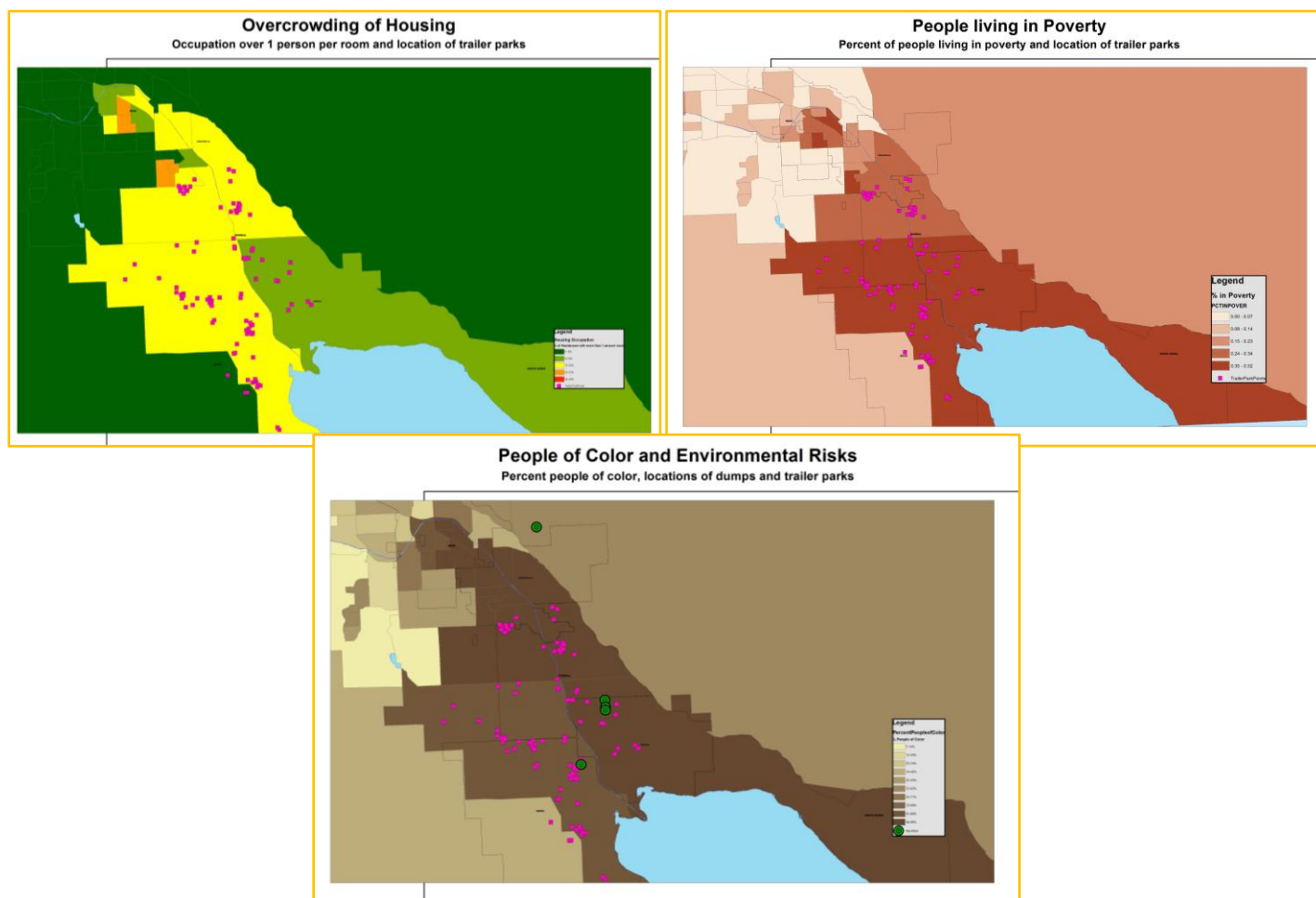
Farm workers are a special subgroup of the population targeted in housing policy. Agriculture is a central sector driving the economy of Riverside County. According to the County of Riverside Office of the Agricultural Commissioner 2011 Agricultural Production Report, the total gross crop production in 2011 was worth \$1.28 billion but has a financial multiplier effect equal to \$4.33 billion dollars into the local economy county wide.^v Over half of the gross crop production is estimated to be generated in the Coachella Valley, meaning that at least \$641 million were generated in this region representing an economic impact of approximately \$2.17 billion for the Coachella Valley. These crops are produced by thousands of farmworkers who are paid very low wages.

Coachella Valley's permanent farmworker population and many other residents in unincorporated areas of the East Coachella Valley, live in several hundred scattered and isolated mobile home parks. More than 100 of these are unpermitted. Some of them are located on tribal lands outside the jurisdiction of state legal protections and others were built without proper building permits and are managed in conditions far below the requirements of state law. Riverside County efforts to enforce permitting requirements in these parks often pushes residents into homelessness or even worse housing conditions in other settlements that remain under the radar. A 2007 ECV Poder Popular report estimates that the average mobile home household size is 5.8 persons.^{vi} A large single-wide mobile home would provide 1,620 square feet of living space, resulting in extreme overcrowding.

Employer-provided farm worker housing is often substandard or nonexistent. Over the last several decades most farm-provided housing has been demolished and not replaced. East Coachella Valley provided some in the past no longer. Relatively few farms provide labor camp housing. The East Coachella Valley's permanent farmworker population resides overwhelmingly in the mobile home parks in the area. As a result, many migrant farm workers^{vii} must move temporarily into existing overcrowded housing, camp in the open, or sleep in their vehicles. A recent survey indicates that 30% of migrant farm workers in the ECV live in situations not meant for human habitation such as in vehicles and converted garages or outbuildings. Awareness of opportunities may also present an obstacle to migrant farm workers seeking housing. A recent survey showed that between 64 and 75% of migrant farm workers in the Coachella Valley were unaware of government-funded housing and 90% had never applied for any kind of government housing programs.^{viii}

Environmental Risks

In addition to the substandard and overcrowded condition of the housing stock in the East Coachella Valley, mobile home parks and other housing developments are near a disproportionately high number of environmental hazards, potentially putting residents at risk. With a lack of land use planning and allowance of the creation of mobile home parks without permits for agricultural workers, communities in the region are built near noteworthy dumps—including a sewage sludge dump, a contaminated soil recycling facility, and a construction waste dump that spontaneously burns.^{ix} Additionally, due to the agricultural nature of the region and the situation of housing developments amongst thousands of acres of agricultural fields, residents may be subjected to the threat of agricultural chemicals in the air and water, further diminishing the quality and safety of their housing.



PRE-EXISTING POLICIES

California: State law recognizes the vital role local governments play in the supply and affordability of housing. Each governing body (City Council or Board of Supervisors) of a local government in California is required to adopt a comprehensive, long-term general plan for the physical development of the city, city and county, or county. The housing element is one of the seven mandated elements of the local general plan. . Riverside County has been out of compliance with the state mandated housing element for approximately a decade. ^x

Housing element law mandates that local governments adequately plan to meet the existing and projected housing needs of all economic segments of the community. The law acknowledges that, in order for the private market to adequately address housing needs and demand, local governments must adopt land use plans and regulatory systems that provide opportunities for housing development. As a result, housing policy in California rests largely upon the effective implementation of local general plans and, in particular, local housing elements. Housing element law also requires that the Department of Housing and Community Development review local housing elements for compliance with State law and report written findings to the local government. Additionally, several state funding sources for development of housing require that the applicant jurisdiction have a compliant housing element—thus, non-compliance removes further opportunities for development in those regions.

Riverside County:

- **Home Repair Loan Program** HRLP provides up to \$10,000 for home repair services in the form of a deferred loan. This program is designed to low income owner occupants perform a wide range of repairs.
- **The Senior Home Repair Program** has been redesigned to provide enhanced rehabilitation and repair for low-income senior citizens. The Senior Home Repair Program is available within the unincorporated County and all Community Development Block Grant participating cities.

- **Code Enforcement.** The County continues to provide code enforcement to address code violations that affect the health and safety concerns of county residents.

Farm workers have been identified as a special needs group in Riverside County.

- **Agricultural Housing Facility Loan Fund**^{xi} program provides repair and rehabilitation financing to existing tenant occupied mobile home parks established as Agricultural Housing Facilities per the California State Employee Housing Act.
- **HOME Program.**^{xii} Riverside County will continue to include among its selection criteria for HOME Projects those projects that address the needs of farm workers. In particular, the County will attempt to leverage HOME Funds with FmHA housing loans and grants. Geographically, these funds will be targeted to the lower Coachella Valley, the primary agricultural area in the County.

The proliferation of small mobile home parks on agriculturally-zoned lands in the East Coachella Valley date back to the 1992 Farm Labor Housing Protection Act,^{xiii} an emergency measure that allowed agricultural employers to build parks of up to 12 units on agricultural land without obtaining zoning and land use permits.^{xiv} Many landowners failed to secure any permits whatsoever, resulting in the frequently inadequate and haphazard provision of electricity, water, wastewater facilities, and other infrastructure, which degrade even further over time.

In the late 1990s, Riverside County code enforcers began a campaign to enforce codes in unpermitted East Valley mobile home parks. The county ordered immediate closure of many parks, and ultimately targeted 18 specific parks by filing code enforcement lawsuits against the owners. *and residents.* In response, 30 residents with the representation of California Rural Legal Assistance filed housing discrimination charges with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, saying the county had unfairly targeted Latino-owned parks and treated Latino owners in a less favorable way than white owners. Two years after the charges were filed, HUD announced findings of discrimination as well as a \$21 million settlement and voluntary compliance agreement with the county to pay for community projects, fund low-income housing programs, and provide replacement housing to the farm worker families.^{xv}

POLICY OPTIONS

More housing needs to be built in the East Coachella Valley. While this is taking place, current residences need to be made safe, with adequate infrastructure to support habitability. Until new housing is constructed, other solutions must be advanced. Recent development of migrant housing in the East Coachella Valley has resulted in provision of between 200 and 250 total beds but still falls short of providing shelter for the estimated 5,000 to 10,000 migrants who come to area for several months each year.

Current housing and infrastructure need to be made safe and healthy for residents. Rehabilitation of existing substandard housing and infrastructure, specifically in mobile home parks, is a feasible solution. Riverside County can make funds available to address emergency code enforcement needs. This can be coupled with a more robust official response to provide assistance to displaced families when substandard housing gets “red-tagged.”

Riverside County can reduce or waive fees related to rehabilitation of existing mobile home parks, and streamline the permitting process for those owners who wish to bring their residences into code compliance but cannot afford to or cannot navigate the county’s burdensome process.

The Farm Labor Housing Protection Act (also known as the “Polanco” statute) can be amended to allow mobile home parks larger than 12 units to be built on agricultural lands, to facilitate the rehabilitation and permitting of existing mobile home parks, and to provide alternative new housing options to reduce overcrowding.

Agricultural employers can offer better housing to their permanent and/or temporary farmworkers. In addition to permanent safe and healthy housing facilities, in some regions of the US, licensed growers provide temporary camp sites with sanitary facilities to their workers, who can bring their own tents for the season. Alternatively, growers can provide a Rent-a-Tent option that allows workers to rent a six-person tent, and provides access to a refrigerator, showers, and toilets. This program has been a cost-efficient way to provide housing for the short-term harvest and mitigates the health costs associated with unsanitary housing conditions.

Residents can join the Housing Authority’s Board of Commissioners. John Benoit is the Region 4 Commissioner on the Housing Authority Board. However, up to two residents can gain representation on the Housing Authority’s Board of Commissioners.

Residents can participate in public hearings, such as those held by the Planning Commission, related to housing provision and housing obligations and provide comments on proposed policies impacting housing, including the housing element.

Residents can engage more actively in the political process to ensure that elected officials are responsive to the unique housing needs of the East Coachella Valley.

POLICY DISCUSSION

The recent demise of California redevelopment funding presents challenges to rehabilitation and redevelopment of housing and infrastructure by severely impairing the county's financial resources. These funds were the primary source of funding available to Riverside County for development in the East Coachella Valley and their loss inhibits the county's ability to provide new housing options for Eastern Coachella Valley residents.

Code enforcement is less likely to displace families than prior to the HUD settlement discussed above. However, in the absence of displacement of residents, many mobile home parks continue to operate with substandard conditions because there's no policy or incentive available to persuade park owners to make the needed repairs.

Farmworkers and other low wage workers with legal immigration status are eligible to participate in housing assistance programs, but few can actually obtain benefits. This is because of the mobility of this sub-group and the dramatic fluctuation of their income. Most benefit programs are not designed to accommodate people who move frequently, nor do migrant workers understand they are eligible for benefits.

Another significant barrier to housing in the Coachella Valley is the gap between wages and housing prices. Housing may only be affordable when families or unrelated individuals "double up," resulting in overcrowded conditions in the region. Some low-wage workers are forced to make a choice between housing other necessities. Exacerbating the problem is a lack of funding for affordable (and especially farmworker) housing projects. Since the 1960s, \$1 billion in federal funds have contributed to close to 800 active farmworker housing projects across the country, including nearly 6,300 units in the Federal Reserve's 12th District.^{xvi} But most of the funding is spent on the maintenance of older projects, not on the development of new ones. As the number of low-wage workers has increased, the gap between the supply and demand for housing has grown.

Developers also face significant challenges in securing land for affordable housing projects. According to Nadia Villagran, Director of Community Services for the Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, the lack of funding and the lack of land are linked. "As a nonprofit, we compete with for profit developers for land," she said. "And in many of these areas, the price of land is unaffordable for 'affordable' housing." Zoning laws that restrict housing development can also contribute to the shortage of land. NIMBYist or "Not In My Back Yard" attitudes against farmworkers, low-wage workers, and immigrants can also derail projects and add to the costs of planning and construction.^{xvii}

One key barrier to providing affordable and adequate housing for farm workers is immigration status. Approximately three-quarters of farmworkers are foreign-born, and as many as half of these farmworkers are unauthorized to work in the United States. The lack of legal immigration status can affect housing opportunities in a number of ways. For example, a large number of farmworker housing developments are funded by the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Agency. Federally funded housing requires lease signers to be legal residents, shutting out many farmworkers who need housing. Providers have also found that undocumented farm workers may fear that accepting subsidized housing will bring them to the attention of immigration authorities. Even non-citizen farm workers with legal status cannot vote and thus are not involved in the decision-making processes that lead to creation of policies and programs.

The County estimates that 15% of all lower-income owner-occupied stick-built housing units (and a substantially greater proportion of mobile homes) have physical defects and are in need of rehabilitation or replacement. The estimated cost to bring these units into standard condition is \$20,000 per unit; thus, the County needs multiple millions of dollars to address this need. Among renter households need is believed to be almost at par with the owner occupied units.^{xviii}

Despite the need to address affordable housing and the commitment of Riverside County to focus on the Eastern Coachella Valley, all meetings of the Housing Authority Board of Commissioners are held in the City of Riverside. Meetings are often held at times that are inconvenient or impossible for working residents to attend. This limits the ability of local representatives to attend and voice their positions.

END NOTES

- ⁱ Housing and Homeless Needs Assessment. Chapter III, Consolidated Plan for Riverside County.
<http://www.harivco.org/Resources/ConsolidatedPlanforRiversideCounty/tabid/114/Default.aspx>
- ⁱⁱ Census of Housing. Historical Census of Housing Tables.
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/crowding.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ American Communities Survey data are not directly collected but extrapolated from limited phone surveys nationwide. As a result, they are less accurate for communities such as those in the East Coachella Valley where margins of error are great.
- ^{iv} above
- ^v Riverside County Agricultural Production Report, 2011.
http://www.rivcoag.org/opencms/system/galleries/download/publications/2011_crop_report_pdf.pdf
- ^{vii} Migrant farmworkers are approximately % of the workers in the ECV. Migrant and seasonal workers are defined here as those who move seasonally with the crops and do not live permanently in the region. However, the vast majority of farm workers in California are seasonal in the respect that they are not employed year round.
- ^{viii} Same as above
- ^{ix} See ECV Population and Health Status Report, 2012, California Institute for Rural Studies. Available online at <http://www.cirsinc.org/index.php/projects/environmental-justice-resources-for-the-eastern-coachella-valley/fact-sheets-a-policy-briefs.html>
- ^x Megan Beaman, Attorney. 2013. personal communication.
- ^{xi} <http://www.rivcoeda.org/Default.aspx?tabid=568>
- ^{xii} <http://www.rivcoeda.org/HOMEProgram/AboutHOME/HOMEProgramInformation/tabid/1163/Default.aspx>
- ^{xiii} <http://legis.info/us-ca/measures;1995-96;sb0305/analysis@1995-02-09;senate>
- ^{xiv} For a clear description of the conditions, see *The Colonias Reader*, Angela and Adrian Esparza. University of Arizona Press. 2010. pages 148-151.
- ^{xv} *On edge of a desert paradise, Coachella farm workers live in putrid conditions*. Patricia Leigh Brown, California Watch Published 4:00 am, Tuesday, October 25, 2011 Read more: <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/On-edge-of-a-desert-paradise-Coachella-farm-2325906.php#ixzz2JxiEK6r>
- ^{xvi} This refers to the 12th District of the Federal Reserve System, overseeing monetary policy and investments of federal agencies. The Fed also conducts research into the economy and releases numerous publications including research into farm worker housing in the 12th District.
- ^{xvii} Housing and Homeless Needs Assessment. Chapter III, Consolidated Plan for Riverside County.
<http://www.harivco.org/Resources/ConsolidatedPlanforRiversideCounty/tabid/114/Default.aspx>
- ^{xviii} Housing and Homeless Needs Assessment, Chapter III.



CALIFORNIA
INSTITUTE FOR
RURAL STUDIES

with technical support from UC Davis Center for Regional Change and funding from The California Endowment.