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Housing Choice and Access in the Eastern Coachella Valley: An Ethnographic Study of Housing among Low-Wage Workers

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7w5416mc>

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Publication Date

2019-07-01



POLICY BRIEF

Housing Choice and Access in the Eastern Coachella Valley: An Ethnographic Study of Housing among Low-Wage Workers

2019 | Christian Mendez MURP '19

ISSUE

The Eastern Coachella Valley is one of the major agricultural areas in Southern California, and agricultural workers represent the area’s main labor force. The overwhelming majority of these residents are people of color, and most of them are low-income with limited housing choices. As residents navigate the housing landscape, many of their experiences are indicative of their larger social experiences in the Eastern Coachella Valley.

The goal of this research is to more holistically understand the housing typologies and choices available to agricultural workers in the Eastern Coachella Valley, located in Riverside County. This is done by looking beyond availability and rental price data to the social, economic, and physical considerations that drive some to live in unexpected places or conditions, including mobile home parks and accessory dwelling units (ADUs).

APPROACH

This research uses qualitative data gathered from residents of the Eastern Coachella Valley, highlighting narratives from residents. The methodology is divided into two different components that function conjunctively with each other: case study interviews and surveys. Data collection was staggered in order to use the responses from the case study interviews to inform

the survey. The collected data is analyzed to identify similarities and differences among the responses of participants representing the same typologies in terms of challenges, motivations, and access. The analysis seeks to go beyond economic access to understand how such elements as social and physical access lead to the specific housing-related decisions made by individuals.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three key findings emerged from this analysis. First, the choice to live in non-traditional housing, such as ADUs, was not dictated by necessity alone, but rather the pull of financial flexibility low-cost housing provided. Second, for residents unable to access housing through program initiatives, their choices were more responsive to time-sensitive opportunities. Chance opportunities like a specific apartment opening or the sale of a mobile home dictated their housing choices. Finally, if most people were given the opportunity to own their own stick-built home, they would do so. It is clear, however, that for many this is unachievable, whether due to financial constraints or the limited amount of accessible stick-built housing.

CONCLUSIONS

A more holistic approach to housing policy in the Eastern Coachella Valley has the capacity to improve

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Housing choice is limited among low-wage workers in the Eastern Coachella Valley.
- Not all housing programs address housing needs for residents.
- Residents will continue to utilize unpermitted housing options.



Figure. Mobile home located in family ranch in Oasis, Riverside County.

the lives of the low-wage workers who make up the bulk of the region's workforce. In order to improve the situation facing agricultural workers in the Eastern Coachella Valley, officials can implement the following recommended policies:

- Riverside County should reinstate housing programs that work with residents to improve housing conditions in mobile homes and ADUs. This would increase the livability of those residing in non-traditional housing.
- Riverside County should expand its Mutual Self-Help Housing Programs.
- In order to stabilize the housing market, Riverside County and nonprofit housing agencies should explore the retroactive implementation of rent-to-own housing policies for apartment buildings.
- Riverside County should incorporate housing policies that are sensitive to residents' experiences and social conditions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Mendez, C. (2019). *Housing choice and access in the Eastern Coachella Valley: An ethnographic study of housing among low-wage workers* (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/2019-capstone_mendez_housing-in-east-coachella-valley/