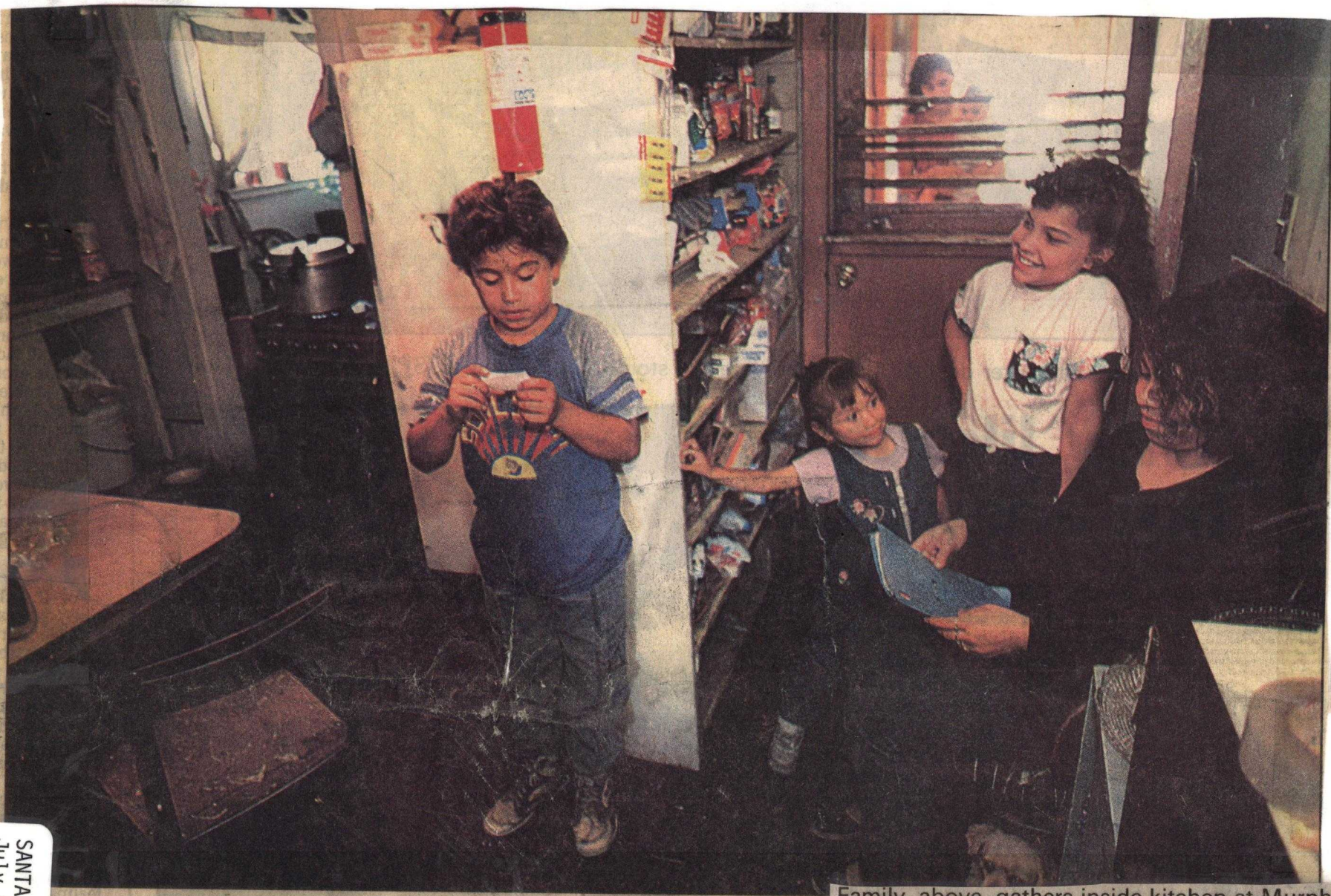


# CRAMPED QUARTERS



Family, above, gathers inside kitchen at Murphy Camp, where conditions prompted the District Attorney's office to file suit against camp owner.

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL  
July 12, 1992

PTOS BRANC  
7695 C  
California 95033

REFERENCE



Boy plays in yard among overflowing dumpsters at Murphy Camp.



# Housing dilemma faces farm laborers

By TERESA JIMENEZ  
Sentinel staff writer

**WATSONVILLE** — For rent: A small two-bedroom apartment, surrounded by large dirt lot, exterior paint peeling, rats and cockroaches have been eliminated, fire extinguishers missing, sewage system occasionally fails, plenty of neighbors — only \$400-\$600 a month.

These apartments are what farmworkers rent when they migrate here, often from Mexico, to work in the county's \$196-million agricultural industry. But they

- *San Andreas is the worst, U.S. official says* — Page A5
- *Sewage system prohibits year-round living* — Page A5

and their families would likely become homeless if rundown housing were condemned, because few alternatives are

available for employees of agriculture, estimated at 5,000 to 15,000 people.

Many of the workers who rent at the so-called labor camps speak Spanish only, and are uneasy talking about their living conditions. Men and women say "everything is good." The children, however, tell of dirty tap water and people packed like sardines in the small rooms.

While most labor camps in the county meet minimum health and safety standards, many date to the 1950s or earlier and are rundown from years of hard use. Built barracks-style as quarters for single men under the bracero program that ended 30 years ago, they are too small for large families.

"A lot are very old, and some camps have closed because it costs too much to fix them. If they meet the minimum standards, that's all we can ask for," said county Environmental Health Manager Bob Carey. "The interiors are better than the exteriors."

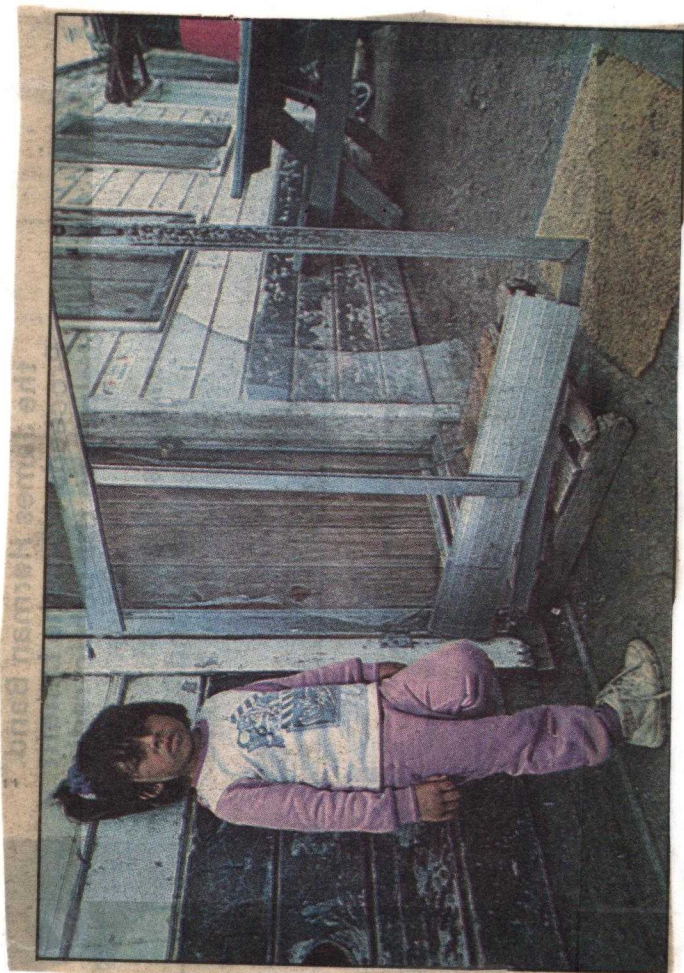
In a review of farmworker housing regulation in Santa Cruz County, the Sentinel found:

- Living conditions at camps vary widely, depending on who the owner is and which agency is responsible for enforcement of the state law governing farmworker housing.

- Though the state law requires that any housing with five or more farm laborers be registered as a labor camp, numerous apartment buildings and houses in the county provide farmworkers with similar shelter — often overcrowded and in violation of health, safety, fire or zoning codes.

- County and city administrators say they can't

Please see **DILEMMA** — A4



At right, a young girl stands outside her home at labor camp owned by Watsonville City Councilman Tony Campos and leased to A.P. Farms. The Watsonville camp meets health and safety standards, according to county inspectors.

Bill Loveloy/Sentinel photos



Continued from Page A1

afford to hire more inspectors to see that dwellings with farmworkers get registered as labor camps and meet health and safety codes.

• While overcrowding exists even at registered camps, it is a problem that county officials have yet to address. In fact, officials are looking into reducing the number of low-income housing units to be built over the next four years.

Social groups and government agencies often have found themselves caught between seeing that shelter is available for farm laborers while at the same time ensuring that the places where they live meet health, safety, and zoning codes.

"That's the dilemma we face," said attorney Gary McNeil of Legal Aid Society of Santa Cruz County, which gives legal assistance to farmworkers. "Generally we encourage rehabilitation. We're working statewide with code enforcement for protocol on situations like this. But we want relocation as a last resort."

County Supervisor Ray Belgard, who represents the Watsonville area, acknowledged that providing adequate low- and very low-income housing is difficult without encroaching on agricultural land.

According to the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, the county must provide 7,672 low- and very low-income units in the next four years. The county, however, is requesting that the number be reduced to 4,675 units. The state has not ruled on the request.

"It's a catch-22 in many respects," Belgard said. "You don't want to go on ag land, but we need the workers. We have to give up something."

# Conditions at labor camps in the county

Meets minimum standards



## Good

## Not in compliance

Source: Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Department

Chris Carothers/Sentinel



## State law covers farmworker housing

Conditions of farmworker housing are covered under the state Employee Housing Act, which establishes penalties double those for other landlords if fire or health code violations are found, according to Ed King, chief of housing standards for the state Department of Housing and Community Development. Those penalties can include four years in jail, a fine of \$10,000 for each violation of the state law, or both. Additional violations result in \$6,000 fines.

Despite the county's ability to fine camp owners, no landlords have been penalized, said county planner Mark Deming. Enforcing penalties, he said, costs taxpayers money.

"If you force us to penalize people, you're going to pay," Deming said.

In Santa Cruz County, a county task force composed of fire, health and planning department officials annually inspects the 25 registered labor camps where, owners say, 540 farmworkers live. The county assumed the responsibility from the state. State inspectors check housing in Watsonville.

A review of county inspection reports for the past year shows three camps do not meet the minimum standards. County officials said 17 do meet the standards, but because of age aren't necessarily in good shape. Five were described by the inspector as good, exceeding the standard.

Among the three needing major repairs is Murphy Camp, off Murphy Crossing Road outside Watsonville, where 160 workers and their families live in 32 units.

Before the county demanded changes, the apartments were not only crowded, but unsanitary and unsafe. Drinking water was contaminated with dirt. The owner recently installed a new fire alarm system at the demand of Salspuedes Fire Department to bring the buildings up to code.

The task force's April report on violations at Murphy Camp led to the county filing suit that month against the owners and former owners.

Owner Cesar Gutierrez, who bought Murphy Camp in November 1991, said he wanted to make things better for the people living there. He said he'd like to begin aerobics classes and activities at the camp for children.

"My son asked me why I got involved in this. I thought it was a good thing at the time," said Gutierrez. "I should just walk away from this. I'm going under \$4,000-\$5,000 every month to meet county requirements and I haven't paid the mortgage."

He just got a letter with a notice of foreclosure from Mike Lewis and Sam Ramos, who sold him the camp with no down payment.

The goal of the county suit, which also presses criminal charges against the owners, is not to shut down the labor camp or fine the owners, but to improve conditions, said Morgan Taylor, assistant district attorney.

"We need to look toward a situation, decide if it's safe and habitable, if we need to relocate people for a short period of time, or if it needs to be shut down," she said.

"We don't want them to live in overcrowded conditions, but they don't have an alternative," said



**'I think the county has been lax in enforcing its own policies'**

— Supervisor Ray Belgard

McNeil of Legal Aid. "If we make them leave, they'll end up living under a bridge, in their car."

County officials prefer to give owners time to comply before filing suit for violations, Carey said.

Inexpensive housing that meets standards is in short supply. That's why Tony Campos, a Watsonville city councilman, hasn't torn down his A.P. Farms labor camp, which he said "doesn't look good." The camp, at the end of Errington Road in Watsonville, is leased to and run by A.P. Farm owners, he said.

"I want to tear it down and rebuild it, but farmworkers need that housing," Campos said. "It's a funny line, trying to keep everyone happy."

Campos' camp, though it sits in the middle of a dirt lot and needs paint, meets all health and safety codes, according to county records. Inspectors requested minor repairs.

"I don't care how they look as long as they're clean, the electricity works and the extinguishers are there," said Campos.

He said he believes the system of inspections works.

## Some labor housing receives less scrutiny

A sizable number of farmworkers already live away from the farm in housing that is under much less scrutiny than the labor camps near the fields.

Social service officials say these rental units, many of them located in the city of Watsonville, could be defined as labor camps and made subject to inspection. For example, farmworkers occupy houses on West Lake Avenue, Union Street and Carey Avenue, in a neighborhood of industrial buildings.

"Half this town could be certified as a labor camp," said Celia Organista of Watsonville, manager of Adelante, an information service for Hispanic and low-income people.

Housing must be registered if it's occupied by five or more farmworkers.

"If you have an apartment house in a rural area, even a town, and you are housing five or more farm workers, it must be registered," said King, of the state housing department. The size or purpose of the building is irrelevant, he said.

"If we went into a city and found someone housing ag employees in a garage, we would double any fines and require the owners to get a permit for a labor camp," King said. And to operate as a labor camp, the housing would have to be approved by all

health and building code agencies, he added.

Supervisor Ray Belgard said he receives reports from his constituents in Watsonville of people living in garages and crowded houses.

"We'd get a fire call and find a full bedroom, sink and bathroom where you thought there was a two-car garage," said Belgard, who served six years as Watsonville police chief. "I put two good people in jail and nine children in foster care (because of an illegal dwelling). I don't feel good about it, but if it had burned down and a couple kids died, I'd feel like an ass because I didn't do something."

But government intrusions into housing like that are few, Organista said, and as a result, conditions go down and rents go up.

"I think the county has been lax in enforcing its own policies," said Belgard.

Fabiola Avila, who works at Adelante, said she's heard of people paying \$100 a month per person for rent, with 30-60 farmworkers in one house.

A 54-year-old man who sought Adelante's services said he lives on Sixth Street in a four-bedroom house that rents to 50 people at \$150 a head. Fifteen people, he said, live in the house's garage. There are two bathrooms.

The man, who asked that his name not be used, lives there with his two grown sons. He said he's afraid to leave because he has no other place to go.

Avila said overcrowded houses often have toilets and stoves that don't work and no refrigerators. Some tenants have told her of houses infested with rats and mice.

The problem, said Ray Toshitsune, the county environmental health



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

This house on West Lake Avenue in Watsonville is home to a group of farmworkers.

manager, is that most overcrowded buildings are illegal boarding houses and wouldn't meet health, fire and safety codes set by the Employee Housing Act.

Most would not have enough bathrooms, a big enough kitchen, or the required 50 square feet per person for the number of people living there, he said.

In addition, he said, the city of Watsonville could charge owners of overcrowded houses with running a business in a residential area — a zoning violation.

Last month, Watsonville City Councilman Todd McFarren, in a move to crack down on zoning violations, requested that a code enforcement officer be included in the city's \$51.6 million budget for the 1992-93 fiscal year.

With the recession, revenues are down in the city and statewide, and City Manager Steve Salomon said the city can't afford to hire someone. The city's hiring freeze is entering its second year.

The county doesn't crack down on these zoning violations, either. Because of limited staff, inspections are made only when a complaint is made, Toshitsune said. Three employees inspect labor camps, among other duties.

And complaints are few, Avila said. Farmworkers living in crowded

houses and apartment buildings won't complain about cost or conditions, Avila said, because they don't want to be forced out.

### Owners required to relocate tenants

Celia Organista said owners should be required to fix up buildings when violations are found.

"If the owners don't keep them up, they should pay for the relocation of the residents," she said.

A county ordinance adopted Sept. 17, 1991, mandates exactly that. Dave Laughlin, county code compliance chief, said the ordinance requires owners of condemned buildings to pay residents' rent for three months.

Several farmworker tenants have taken advantage of the new ordinance, McNeil said. County supervisors are expected to review the ordinance's effectiveness in a few months, he said.

The former owner of Murphy Camp said requiring owners to pay for relocation doesn't solve the problems of overcrowding.

"When Legal Aid told (Murphy Camp residents) about the county's relocation ordinance, no one wanted to leave," said Mike Lewis. "The rent is cheap and they have a community there."

But McNeil, the Legal Aid attorney, said tenants at the camp won't be able to take advantage of the ordinance until the owners are forced to either reduce the number of people living there or close it down, which hasn't happened yet.

Even if tenants are forced out, Lewis said, the options are few.

"A lot of them have eight children in a two-bedroom apartment. There isn't a legal place for them to move to," he said.

### County beginning to seek solutions

The county does not have information on the number of farmworkers, how many need housing, or the number of housing units available for farmworkers, and administrators can't begin to search for solutions until they know the extent of the problem, said Jeff Loux, assistant planning director.

Last year, the county Board of Supervisors formed a committee to look at conditions at the registered labor camps and figure out how many more low-income units are needed to house farmworkers. Supervisors wanted to limit the number of housing units on valuable agricultural land.

Planners have drafted a section on housing for the county's general plan — a blueprint for development for the next five years. The report describes farm laborers as a group with special needs and lists as one of its goals "to insure that all county residents have equal access to housing opportunities."

The nature of agricultural workers in the county is changing, from seasonal labor to permanent employees, the report said.

Yet, farmworkers remain among the lowest-paid workers. Census data from 1980, the most recent available, indicate a median income nationwide of \$11,725 — less than \$1,000 a month — compared to \$18,423 for all households.

This income must support larger than average households. The county plan notes a 1985 study that found more than 30 percent of farmworker households included five or more people.

The county's plan to improve housing availability for farmworkers calls for counting those households and assessing housing needs. Federal funds were allocated last year for the study, which should be complete by September 1993, county planner Cherry McCormick said.

McCormick said farmworkers and labor camps probably have been examined before, but "in recent years, as far as going out and doing a head count, this is the first time."

The county plan states that 5,720 people worked in agriculture in September 1990. But that figure is low, compared to a report from the state Employment Development Department, which estimated the county had 14,800 agricultural employees in May of this year.

Kathy Mechem, an EDD analyst, said the lower number is based on the number of working hours available, with one employee working 40 hours. The other number is based on employee tax records filed by the employer.

### Barracks now house families

Crowding at the camps has resulted, in part, because of the original purpose of the buildings. They are the remnants of the bracero program, which provided barracks for Mexican migrant workers — all single men, McNeil said. The program was dissolved in 1962, and families have moved into the apartments.

To develop solutions, the county created a committee with representatives of the planning department, the farm industry and community and advocacy groups to oversee the study. That committee met for the second time last month to map out its plans.

Along with McNeil and Organista, members include Jess Brown of the Farm Bureau; Bill Rinne, of the county Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission; growers Bruce Dow and Ed Ortega; Ramon Gomez, a UC Santa Cruz student who lived in migrant housing; Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios; and Sister Rosa Delores of Davenport Resource Center.