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Unjust and Unsafe: The Eviction Experiences of Latine Immigrant and Farmworker Tenants in Oregon

Natalie J. Cholula

Portland State University, ncholula@pdx.edu

Lisa Bates

Portland State University, lkbates@pdx.edu

Alex Farrington

Portland State University, alexfarrington@pdx.edu

Marisa Zapata

Portland State University, mazapata@pdx.edu

Jacen Greene

Portland State University, jacen@pdx.edu

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Authors

Natalie J. Cholula, Lisa Bates, Alex Farrington, Marisa Zapata, Jacen Greene, Azad Amir-Ghassemi, and Colleen Carroll

Unjust and Unsafe: The Eviction Experiences of Latine Immigrant and Farmworker Tenants in Oregon

INTRODUCTION

Research finds that Latine immigrant households experience housing instability as a result of language barriers, immigration status, and limited access to government resources (Westbrook, 2023).¹ Immigrant households, which include farmworker families, often live in substandard housing conditions and struggle with overcrowding caused by low wages and low availability of affordable housing (Hannon, 2022).² Their financial vulnerability further exacerbates the housing insecurity of immigrant farmworkers due to their dependence on seasonal work and living in rural areas with limited resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating impacts on households' financial stability, putting Latine renters in an even more precarious situation. In Oregon, eviction court filings have surged to the highest levels in the state's history, with one in 30 renters facing an eviction filing.³ The high eviction rate is particularly alarming, considering that over half of Oregon renters report being rent-burdened.⁴ Moreover, eviction court filings do not provide a complete picture of the displacement caused by eviction, making it difficult to accurately measure the number of households affected.

Approximately 10 percent of Oregon residents are immigrants, most of whom are from Mexico, and 60 percent of agricultural workers are immigrants.⁵ The risk of eviction is particularly concerning for over 60,000 immigrant farmworker households living in the state. Most of these households are rent-burdened and live in overcrowded conditions.⁶ Farmworkers in Oregon contribute to the state's \$5 billion revenue in farm commodities. Despite their significant contribution, their annual average income is just \$20,000 to \$25,000. Compared to national rates, these workers are twice as likely to be living in poverty, leaving them in a risky housing situation given the state's affordable housing shortage. Studies have found that farmworkers in Oregon face social isolation due to language barriers, lack of transportation, and documentation status.^{7,8}

In light of the identified needs and lack of equitable access to resources that Latine immigrants and farmworkers experience, it is important to understand how they navigate evictions to help advance programs of support. The Evicted in Oregon research team conducted focus groups with Latine immigrant and farmworker tenants in Multnomah, Washington and Marion Counties to understand how they experience eviction. Through these discussions, we identify three patterns that are unique to the experiences of Latine immigrants and farmworkers who face eviction: landlords mistreating tenants, fear of legal system contact, and navigating unfamiliar procedures that are harmful to their health and family.

METHODS

The Evicted in Oregon research team conducted five focus groups with four to six Latine immigrants and farmworkers in Multnomah, Washington, and Marion Counties. In total, 25 immigrant and farmworker tenants who received a termination notice from a landlord from March 2020 to October 2023 participated in a focus group. In Oregon, farmworkers refer to laborers who do work related to cultivating the soil and harvesting any agricultural and aquaculture commodity, including but not limited to catching, handling, planting, packing, and storing products. Other farmworker labor includes forestation of land, such as the planting, transplanting, and thinning of trees and seedlings.⁹

Community organizations in the area assisted with participant recruitment for the focus groups; therefore, most study participants received assistance from a community organization at some point during the COVID-19 pandemic. A bilingual researcher facilitated most focus group discussions in person and in Spanish, with additional support from interpreters for a focus group with mixed language speakers. The research team provided the participants with a complimentary meal and a \$50 gift card. Focus group transcripts were analyzed in both languages using qualitative research software to identify key findings and themes.

RESULTS

Discussions with Latine immigrants and farmworkers show three patterns that are unique to their experiences of eviction: 1) distinctive unjust and unfair practices from landlords and property managers, 2) the fear of legal system involvement, and 3) the health and familial impacts of navigating unfamiliar systems like eviction procedures and support services. These patterns expose how the power imbalance between landlords and tenants creates an environment where landlords can abuse their authority, perpetuating the inequalities Latine immigrant and farmworker families face. The research team presents an overview of tenants' experiences and outcomes of eviction in the [Fight, Flight, Freeze](#) report, including those of other vulnerable groups.¹⁰ However, the current report emphasizes the unique and discernible impacts, fears, and outcomes that Latine immigrants and farmworkers experience during eviction, arising from their specific economic and immigration status.

Unjust and unfair practices from landlords

Research has shown that landlords' discretionary power results in unfair screening practices toward rental applicants (Roseti, 2020),¹¹ and allows landlords to threaten tenants with eviction, leaving them with a poor rental history (Garboden & Rosen, 2019).¹² Also, landlords and property managers engage in other unfair practices while tenants live on the property, including failing to provide safe and adequate housing. Landlords already hold a position of power as property owners, which allows them to abuse their authority. For Latine immigrant farmworkers who face language barriers and social isolation, unfair practices from landlords only worsen the social,

legal, and financial barriers they already experience. Unfair practices from landlords perpetuate the inequalities that immigrant farmworkers face, making it even harder for them to access the resources and support they need to maintain stable housing.

Language Barriers

During focus group discussions, tenants were asked about their experiences with language barriers during eviction and how they managed their tenancy as English learners. Many tenants shared that landlords communicate with them only in English, particularly in documents such as leasing contracts and eviction notices. To decipher these documents, tenants often rely on their children or friends to translate documents related to their tenancy. One mother said, “My oldest son is the one who helps me translate the papers they [property manager] send me. I don’t know what it says.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

Another tenant explained that she must set an appointment with the leasing staff to sign a rental agreement in English.

“Actually, when we renew the contract [...] I ask the manager to help me fill it out because it is in English. And they tell me, ‘Ok, but you need to make an appointment.’ I make my appointment and I go. I tell them what is [it] that I have to do and they tell me, ‘No, well here you just sign, sign, sign.’ I don’t know what the papers say...” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

Many other tenants mention that they sign contracts in English without fully comprehending the contents of the documents. These language barriers create significant challenges for tenants and contribute to feelings of exploitation and unfair treatment from property owners and staff.

Unsafe and Substandard Housing Conditions

Despite language barriers, tenants still inform landlords of the necessary repairs needed on the property. However, they feel that landlords often ignore or show indifference towards their repair requests, which makes them feel unfairly treated. Tenants mentioned numerous instances where landlords or leasing office staff failed to make necessary repairs on the property. For example, a tenant shared that their roof was leaking after a rainy season, and the property manager’s solution was to bring them buckets to catch the water.

“The upstairs neighbors, everything was wet where they sleep [...] And for us, since we live at the bottom, all of the water was coming down to our apartment. [...] And they (office staff) brought us several buckets to put there in the apartment. And that is not ok, because I say ... how do they want us to pay, they even want to kick us out if we don’t pay, and how is it that when the apartments are bad they don’t come and say, ‘I will come and fix it or don’t pay because it is bad.’” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

The tenant recognizes the injustice in the rental system, where they are obligated to pay the rent in full and on time every month to avoid the risk of eviction. On the other hand, landlords ignore their obligation to provide safe and secure housing, leaving tenants vulnerable to potential

hazards. In other cases, landlords pressure tenants to pay for the repairs first; if tenants disagree, their concerns are not addressed. A tenant describes a situation in which a stranger damaged the property, and the property manager's response was to pressure the tenant to pay for the repair.

"And in the moment, I called the manager as an emergency and told them what was happening and she told me, 'Ok, just do the police report, I can't do anything, but you will have to pay it.'" (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

The tenant then explained that she requested that the broken item be replaced on more than one occasion. However, the property manager continued to pressure her into paying for the replacement until she warned the manager that she would get the assistance of a lawyer to help settle the issue. While the tenant waited for the repair, she worried about the health and safety of her children.

Property owners' refusal to repair damages on the property is often a form of intimidation used against tenants to pressure them into vacating the rental unit. Additionally, landlords intentionally create uninhabitable conditions to force tenants out. One tenant explained that despite their best efforts to fight the eviction, it was difficult for his family to remain on the property after the landlord cut the unit's services.

"And in addition to that, we couldn't stay there, because we didn't have services, not even the bathroom. He cut all of the services." (Latine immigrant group 2022)

Tenants live in unsafe housing conditions while facing the constant threat of eviction. While they bear the responsibility of paying rent on time, landlords can easily choose to neglect necessary repairs to their property. The unequal power dynamic between landlords and tenants is evident in the poor quality of housing provided or created by property owners.

Fear of Legal System Contact

For Latine immigrants and farmworkers, contact with the legal system leads to fear of being separated from their children, potential identification of immigration status, and contact with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

"ICE is going to be waiting for me."

A common theme among participants was their fear of going to court. One tenant said, *"For me, it is worrying. Because they do send people to court ... I am scared of going to court."* (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

Other tenants even expressed concerns about potential exposure to ICE through eviction legal proceedings. For instance, one tenant said:

“I imagined, they are going to send me to court, and maybe at court, ICE is going to be waiting for me and they are going to deport me.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

During a discussion about exercising their tenant rights as immigrants, mothers expressed concern that eviction legal proceedings could lead to deportation and family separation. Tenants discussed that due to their immigration status and fear of court, they hesitated to speak up about their landlord’s unfair practices and execute their rights as tenants. One mother who struggles with unsafe and substandard housing conditions explains why she chooses to stay silent about the unfairness of her eviction case:

“And I think it restricts us a lot, and it is better to say, ‘Let’s stay silent because perhaps we will get sent to court...’, and that is our fear, for me to leave my kids here.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

Two other tenants provide additional context about how their fear of system involvement pressures them to tolerate unfair practices from landlords and property managers.

“Many times, we have to pay more money than what they charge us just so that we don’t step into court, because of fear.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

“That is why we pay, so that we don’t go to court, we’ll figure out where to get the money, but we don’t want to go to that place.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

Many tenants felt apprehensive about getting involved in the legal system, forcing them to tolerate uninhabitable housing conditions due to fear of retaliation or eviction. Equally concerning is that landlords hold a significant amount of power and discretion and are equipped with legal protection to capitalize on these fears, resulting in unfair treatment towards tenants that affects their housing stability.

Health and Familial Impacts of Eviction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant economic impact on many tenants. The threat of forced displacement was an added burden, leading many tenants to feel distressed, anxious, and depressed as they worried about job security and providing food for their families. Navigating the unfamiliar territory of eviction procedures and finding appropriate resources for rental assistance only added to their stress and anxiety. As immigrants, tenants also faced the additional challenge of not knowing their rights as tenants and whether they qualified for support, further compounding their concerns about their housing and financial security.

The Emotional and Mental Health Impacts: The Stress is Daily

Although most participants received some form of rental assistance during their eviction case, it was not enough to completely alleviate their worries. One tenant who received support from a community organization described the impact that the threat of forced displacement had on her

well-being. Despite the support of a caseworker, she still experienced uncertainty about how she would pay her rent.

“I would call her (caseworker) crying and I would tell her, ‘What am I going to do?’

‘Don’t worry, I will help you,’ she would tell me.

I fell into a state of depression, it was something that when you’re depressed, you don’t even know what to do anymore, everything closes in on you.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

For many of the tenants, the eviction provoked stress and other health concerns, including restlessness. One tenant mentioned, “The stress is daily [...] and sometimes you don’t even sleep because you are thinking about where I am going to get money.” Additionally, the accumulation of other bills intensified tenants’ distress. One tenant shared the difficulty of navigating the threat of eviction on top of other bills.

“And you’re trying to collect the money, and you’re between the food, the light [bill], this and that. You don’t even know what to do. In my case, it even stresses me, I get a headache, a migraine that doesn’t go away for a long time.” (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

The accumulation of multiple worries that include housing, money, and basic needs while being low-wage farmworkers highlights the importance of identifying the impacts of eviction to prevent them. Moreover, Latine immigrants and farmworkers’ experiences with negative mental health impacts demonstrate how rental assistance alone may not be enough to address the underlying issues of housing insecurity that many of them face.

The Strain of Eviction Threats on Children

The strain of housing insecurity on the children of immigrant farmworkers is particularly concerning since parents often rely on their adolescent children for translation and interpretation to communicate with the landlord. This places the children in a position where they become involved in the complexities of navigating landlord-tenant relationships that could potentially disrupt their education and family relationships.

A few tenants talked about how their children were concerned about the rent payment and noticed their parents’ distress. When asked to share how the threat of eviction impacted their household, a mother recounts an interaction with her son, who asked whether the rent had been paid.

Participant 1: “He tells me, ‘Mom, you haven’t paid the rent.’

‘It’s because there is no money.’

‘And now what are we going to do?’

I tell him, 'I don't know, but we will do something.'" (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

When she shared this interaction with her son, participants further discussed how their children were impacted after receiving the eviction notice.

Participant 1: "[He says] 'But we only have 72 hours, and if not they will break the contract and we will go to court, to the street.' I tell him, 'Don't you worry.' But still, even though you want to give them that peace of mind, I think it reflects that stress that you bring, because in that moment you can reassure your children but they see..."

Participant 2: "They notice, yes."

Participant 1: "They see that we are worried." (Latine immigrants and farmworkers group 2023)

Evictions have severe negative impacts on the financial, health, and overall well-being of households with children. However, eviction is incredibly challenging for Latine immigrants and farmworkers who fear that forced displacement could lead to contact with the legal system and cause deportation and family separation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Latine immigrants and farmworkers face housing challenges due to unfair and unjust landlord practices. Therefore, it is necessary to advance support systems that meet the growing Latine population's legal, cultural, and language needs. Our study shows that even when tenants receive rental assistance, additional support is needed to alleviate concerns about being in contact with and navigating the complex legal system. Considering their fear of legal system contact in the face of eviction, support systems must effectively address these overlapping needs related to housing challenges, language barriers, and immigration status. The research team recommends implementing a Tenant Right to Counsel and expanding emergency rental assistance as a public health measure. These efforts will provide legal support to tenants experiencing unfair practices from landlords and financial assistance to minimize the risk of homelessness.

Our study indicates that the threat of eviction has devastating impacts on Latine immigrant and farmworker households even when rental assistance is available from community organizations. An Eviction Navigation program, more clearly outlined in the [Fight, Flight, Freeze](#) report, can be particularly helpful to Latine immigrants and farmworkers because they would have a point of contact with a navigator who can connect them with legal aid, rental assistance, and mental health services. Since many tenants raised concerns about unsafe housing conditions and unfair practices from landlords, receiving legal assistance will be highly valuable to Latine immigrants navigating unknown procedures and systems related to court hearings, rental assistance applications, and tenant-landlord relations. Legal aid and an eviction

navigation program can also help reduce fears associated with legal system contact for immigrant families. Eviction navigators who possess a well-rounded knowledge and understanding of local and state resources for tenants, including language services to support Indigenous farmworkers, can provide the confidence and sense of safety that immigrant families need to mitigate the risks and fears associated with eviction.

Language justice practices are essential for providing effective and equitable services and access to the legal system for Latine immigrants. Focus group discussions highlight the importance of expanding community support services that address Latine immigrants and farmworkers' needs intersecting with legal and language support, both in community organizations and legal services and inside the courtroom. These language services must not be limited to Spanish but also include access to interpreters for Indigenous language speakers. According to the Oregon Health Authority, the state has received language requests for over fifteen different Indigenous languages, with the highest number of requests coming from Marion, Umatilla, and Multnomah Counties.¹³ These requests for language services emphasize the importance of community resource programs being equipped with appropriate language services to meet the needs of the growing immigrant and Indigenous population.

It is crucial to continue outreach efforts that promote social, legal, and rental support services in various community spaces like churches, schools, daycares, and local stores to ensure these resources are accessible to the immigrant community. Specifically, since farmworkers and their families often reside in remote rural areas with limited resources, enhancing and supporting outreach initiatives in regions with fewer community organizations and programs that support tenants is necessary. The research included sites with well-established community organizations, such as Centro Cultural, Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, and Oregon Human Development Corporation. These organizations provide various support services, including assistance with housing, employment, food, and cultural events. However, individuals living in rural areas with more recently formed immigrant communities may not have access to the same level of social resources and services. When community members in well-resourced areas struggle to find help, those in rural areas of the state with fewer community organizations and resources are likely to face even more significant challenges. In future research, we aim to focus on communities in rural areas to understand how other immigrant groups, such as Pacific Islanders, compare and to learn more about their eviction experiences and outcomes.

Overall, statewide Tenant Right to Counsel, rental assistance, Eviction Navigation programs, and culturally specific outreach policies can help reduce the adverse mental health effects and financial instability and limit the fear of system involvement that Latine immigrants and farmworker tenants experience in the face of eviction.

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EVICTED IN OREGON

RESEARCH TEAM

Portland State's Evicted in Oregon research team includes: Dr. Lisa K. Bates, Colleen Carroll, Dr. Alex Farrington, Azad Amir-Ghassemi, Dr. Yi Wang, Minji Cho, Natalie Cholula, Hadley Bates, and Andrew Lindstrom. Any errors of interpretation or analysis in this report should be attributed solely to its authors.

CONTRIBUTOR ROLES

Natalie J. Cholula: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing (original draft), visualization, project administration

Lisa K. Bates: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, resources, data management, data curation, writing (review and editing), visualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition

Alex Farrington: Data curation, writing (review and editing), visualization, project administration

Marisa Zapata: Methodology, investigation, funding acquisition

Jacen Greene: Supervision, project administration

Azad Amir-Ghassemi: Writing (review and editing)

Colleen Carroll: Project administration

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REPORT CONTACT

Natalie J. Cholula, MA
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Sociology
Portland State University
ncholula@pdx.edu

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the eviction process, the latest statewide and county-level eviction data, and more visit evictedinoregon.com.

Prepared by
Portland State University - Evicted in Oregon

Evicted in Oregon is a research project interested in understanding how evictions happen, for the purpose of eliminating them.

Web: www.evictedinoregon.com/
Email: evicted@pdx.edu

APPENDIX

Focus Group Questions

Thank you everyone for being here. You are all here to share your eviction experience that happened in the past three years (from March 2020 to now). As we mentioned, we are not affiliated with [name of organization]. We are going to start the discussion by asking you to briefly describe what was happening at the time you received the eviction notice and then we will go into specific questions about your eviction experience as [specific group]. Finally, we'll end with some questions about the outcomes of your eviction experience.

- 1) Please tell us what kind of eviction notice you received. Did you just get something from your landlord, or did you get a summons from court?
 - a) What was the reason listed on the notice by the landlord?
- 2) What are some life events/circumstances that led up to or contributed to your termination notice or eviction?
- 3) What were your biggest needs after receiving the termination/eviction notice?
 - a) Who did you go to for assistance?
 - b) Probe/follow-up: Did you call any tenant organizations or other community organizations for help? Did you apply for emergency rent assistance?
 - c) How did you find out about/learn about these orgs or assistance?
- 4) Did you know what to do about getting a termination notice/eviction case summons?
 - a) Probe/follow-up: Did you understand what your legal rights were? What kind of notice did you receive? Did anyone help you figure that out?
- 5) How did you and your landlord communicate about your termination/eviction notice?
- 6) Ultimately, what was the end of your termination or eviction experience?
 - a) Did you stay in the unit, move out, or?
 - b) Did you access rent assistance either through ELD or another avenue, and was the rent assistance able to help you maintain your housing?
- 7) How did the termination notice or eviction court case impact your health/family/household?
 - i) Did you make changes for your job, kids' school, or other due to moving?
 - ii) Do you have ongoing financial impacts like a payback plan with your landlord?
 - iii) What was the impact of the termination notice or eviction court case on your mental and physical health?
 - iv) Did you get help you needed, other than legal help with the eviction case? Help with cash or food; relocation to new housing; transition with schools?
- 8) Finally, what advice would you give, or do you give, to others in your community who get a termination or eviction notice or eviction court case?

Latine Immigrants and Farmworkers

- Have you experienced language barriers as a renter?
 - Probe/followup:
 - Did you sign a lease in English? If there are questions or issues understanding the lease/contract how do you get help?
 - How do you and your landlord navigate language barriers?
 - Did you get a termination notice or eviction court case summons in English only, and what did you do to get it translated?
- Do you think or feel that your landlord treats you differently because you weren't born in the U.S.?
- How does your immigration status, whatever it is, affect how you respond to an eviction notice or case?
- Probe/followup:
 - Are there strategies you used to avoid going to court with an eviction?
 - Did you feel unwilling or unable to assert some legal rights as a tenant due to your immigration status, like wanting to avoid a court case or having to find a new place to live?