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## 17 people to a bedroom: Report describes living conditions for migrant workers



A group of temporary foreign workers is shown in a file photo.  
Photo: Hi-Berry Farm/Postmedia News



© Published 5 hours ago

David Gordon Koch | Times & Transcript

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Migrant workers who travelled to P.E.I. amid the COVID-19 pandemic have encountered overcrowded and inadequate housing conditions, according to a newly-released study.

The report is based on interviews with 15 migrant workers who arrived on the Island after the pandemic began last year, said Raluca Bejan, assistant professor of social work at Dalhousie University. They include seven fish-plant workers and eight farm workers, the report states.

It's part of a project called Migrant Workers in the Canadian Maritimes, and involves researchers from Dalhousie University, St. Thomas University and the Charlottetown-based Cooper Institute.

In 2020, 1,725 positive Labour Market Impact Assessments - which are required in some cases to hire a temporary foreign worker - were completed for P.E.I., according to statistics from the federal government.

That provides the approximate number of migrant workers who ended up in the province, the report states.

### **Overcrowding**

Farm workers depend on their employers for accommodation, while fish plant workers tend to rent housing in the community, the report states.

Researchers found that employers emphasized COVID-related protocols in workplaces but not in migrant workers' living quarters.

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The federal government requires agricultural employers to meet certain housing requirements, but there's no such stipulation for fish plant workers, Bejan said.

She said overcrowded housing tends to be worse for workers in fish plants.

The report states that up to 17 people would sleep in bunk beds in a single bedroom in a single-family home.

Larger homes designed for 20 people were shared by 30 or even 65 people, according to the report.

"When you have overcrowding, it's impossible to actually keep any social distancing, or any physical distancing protocols," Bejan said.

### **Industry responds**

Robert Godfrey, executive director of the P.E.I. Federation of Agriculture, said the sample size represents a small fraction of temporary foreign workers in the province.

Strict provincial regulations govern facilities for migrant workers on the Island, including housing, and COVID-19 is taken seriously, he said.

"The vast majority of farmers that I know in this part of the country, in this province, follow those orders," he said.

"Labour is very important in the industry and certainly we're concerned by the accusations this report makes."



Nat Richard, executive director of Lobster Processors Association, declined to comment on the report, saying the group would review the findings.

## **Violations**

In 2020, P.E.I.'s Department of Health and Wellness inspected 64 dwellings linked to employers with approved migrant worker positions on farms, with half of the inspections noting "several code violations at multiple houses," the report states.

Examples of violations included six cases of "insufficient or inadequate beds," three cases of insufficient bathroom or kitchen facilities and two cases involving "evidence of rodents."

The 49-page report also examines working conditions and other issues affecting migrant workers, who reported working between 10 and 18 hours per day, often seven days per week, particularly during peak lobster season for fish plant workers.

The report includes a number of recommendations, including permanent residency status for all migrant workers when they arrive in Canada.

It also calls for Ottawa and the province to ensure migrant workers "have access to safe, affordable and dignified housing."

Employment and Social Development Canada didn't respond to queries about housing conditions on the Island by deadline.

## **Protection bill**

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The report comes as the P.E.I. government mulls Bill 19, the Temporary Foreign Worker Protection Act.

The new protections would involve the creation of registries for foreign worker recruiters and employers, and penalties for violations.

In an email, Hillary MacDonald, a government spokesperson, said the bill is currently before a committee.

All Comments **3**

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**Rheal\_Bourgeois** 2 hours ago

It seems that "some", thankfully not all of these businesses that INVITE these Temp MIGRANT Workers have NO sense of decency, morality or Canadian values. They get bargain basement help for work that locals shun and knowingly abuse them. Sad state of affairs it is. The abusers should be named and cut off from the seasonal help program.

Reply ↩

Report 🗨

**Denise\_Kingston\_\_37569** 32 minutes ago

I totally agree Rheal Bourgeois!

Reply ↩

Report 🗨

**Norma\_Forbes\_** 17 minutes ago

Rheal Bourgeois I agree. They will probably say that they are forced to hire TFW because they can't find locals, but in the end, this is probably the way they want it because they end up with a bigger profit.

Reply ↩

Report 🗨

