

Hispanic Workers Die at Higher Rate

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Body

Often hired for low-end jobs like construction labor and meatpacking, Hispanic immigrants in the United States die from workplace injuries at a far higher rate than other workers.

In recent years the rate of on-the-job deaths for all Hispanics has been 20 percent higher than for whites or blacks, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has found. The death rate for Hispanics in construction, an industry that has hired many immigrants in recent years, is even higher, occupational experts say.

Job safety officials say that Hispanic immigrants, often unskilled and often here illegally, are hired disproportionately into many of the most dangerous jobs, like roofing, fruit picking and taxi driving.

Recent occupational safety reports say Hispanic construction workers have died when they have slipped off wet roofs and when the trenches they have been digging have collapsed and buried them. These reports also detail numerous incidents in which migrant farm workers died when crowded vans crashed while their foremen were driving them to the fields.

Dana Loomis, a professor of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina who has studied racial disparities in occupational injuries, said, "There is a long history of discriminatory hiring in the United States involving immigrants, with the result that for many, many years, immigrants have done the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs."

"In many parts of the country," Professor Loomis said, "recent Latino immigrants are being hired because they will accept lower wages and poorer working conditions than U.S.-born workers."

Authorities on occupational safety point to another factor behind the higher injury rate. Hispanic immigrants, partly because many do not speak English, often receive less job and safety training than American-born workers do. Safety experts say language barriers often contribute to the higher Hispanic injury rate, noting, for instance, that at many job sites, safety instructions and warnings appear only in English.

"If someone yells, 'Watch out,' you don't necessarily act as fast if it's not your native language," said James Platner, associate director of the Center to Protect Worker Rights, an educational arm of the Building Trades Department of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

A workplace injury last year in Colorado involved a 19-year-old Hispanic worker who slipped off a wet roof, broke his back and was paralyzed. His supervisor did not speak Spanish and said that made it difficult to tell the worker, who did not speak English, that the roof was dangerously slick. In Texas, job safety officials say, a Hispanic worker died from carbon monoxide poisoning because he was not able to read a warning telling workers not to use power cleaners in enclosed spaces.

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Occupational safety experts say one of the most startling statistics is that the number of Hispanic construction workers who died in workplace accidents rose to 223 in 1999 from 133 three years earlier. That was a 68 percent jump; by contrast, the number of Hispanic construction workers rose by 20 to 30 percent in that three-year period, industry officials estimate.

"Part of it is that Hispanic workers, with their limited job prospects, are more likely than U.S.-born workers to do things that are more dangerous because they are more afraid about losing their job if they refuse to do it," said Tom O'Connor, executive director of the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project, a nonprofit education group. "And part of it is these workers might be more afraid to speak up about dangerous things on the job. And part of it is they are more likely to be employed by fly-by-night contractors who are more likely to cut corners."

In its most recent Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in 1999, Hispanic workers had a fatality rate of 5.2 per 100,000, compared with 4.4 for white workers and 4.1 for black workers. The rates were nearly identical for those groups in 1998. The bureau found that 725 of the 6,023 occupational deaths reported in 1999 involved Hispanic workers.

Rafael Moure-Eraso, a professor of work environment at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell, said the federal statistics probably underreported deaths and injuries to Hispanic workers because many employers are reluctant to report incidents involving illegal immigrants.

"Hispanics are overrepresented in two of the most dangerous industries: agriculture and construction," said Rosemary Sokas, associate director for science at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, which is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "People who have migrated for agricultural work often move into construction work, which is really high risk as well."

With the construction industry booming in recent years, many contractors have relied increasingly on day laborers picked up to fill job openings.

"If you're a day laborer who gets picked up at a local 7-Eleven and paid cash for that day, there's no opportunity to learn about safety on the job," Mr. Platner said. "They're not going to spend a day teaching you about safety."

Hispanic immigrants are often funneled into the most dangerous construction jobs, like roofing, trench digging and carrying heavy materials. In 1999, the fatality rate for roofers was six times the average for all jobs, and for construction laborers, the least skilled building workers, it was eight times as high.

In a survey of 50 Hispanic construction workers by Mr. O'Connor's safety project, the workers said they were frequently given dangerous tasks that American workers did not want. The workers, who said they had little information about their right to safe conditions, said they believed that Hispanic employers were worse to work for than Americans because they were less caring about safety and working conditions.

Another reason for the high fatality rate, safety experts said, is that Hispanic immigrants are usually newer to their jobs than Americans. One Bureau of Labor Statistics study found that 12 percent of serious injuries occurred during a worker's first day at a job site.

And part of the problem is cultural, some Hispanic workers say. "We are not really used to working in a very safe manner," said Dan Garcia, a roofer and safety instructor in Santa Clara, Calif. "On top of that we are often not well informed by the employers on safety precautions."

Carolyn Guglielmo, director of safety services for Associated General Contractors, an industry association representing more than 20,000 building contractors nationwide, said there was a big communication gap between Hispanic workers and many building contractors.

Ms. Guglielmo said that many companies were trying to teach their supervisors to speak Spanish and that her association was promoting Spanish videos to teach Hispanic workers how to take precautions at work and protect themselves.

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Dan Milinazzo, safety director for Associated General Contractors in Colorado, predicted that the death rate for Hispanics would decline as the immigrants moved into safer jobs higher up on the economic ladder and as more Hispanics moved into supervisory positions, enabling them to provide more bilingual training.

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Graphic

Chart: "BY THE NUMBERS: Hispanic Deaths On the Job" Hispanics have a high rate of fatal industrial injuries largely because they work so often in dangerous industries. Fatal industrial injuries per 100,000 workers, 1999. WHITE: 4.4BLACK: 4.1HISPANIC*: 5.2 Fatalities to Hispanic workers in the construction industry. Graph showing the number of deaths of Hispanic workers in the construction industry, from 1993 to 1999. *Hispanics may be of any race.(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics)

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