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THE FACTS ABOUT THE MEATPACKING INDUSTRY IN CALIFORNIA

2021

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**Meatpacking vs. Agriculture &
Other Factory Work**

THE MEATPACKING EMPLOYEES

- In California, meatpacking workers are 80% Hispanic
 - Nationwide, the meatpacking industry predominantly employs minorities and 45% of workers were not born in the U.S.¹
 - 70% of meatpackers are undocumented and/or non-citizens²
 - Most meatpacking workers are uneducated (97.5% do not have a college degree) and are unaware of their rights³
 - Meatpacking workers are typically not unionized, making it harder for them to advocate for their rights
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- 16% of nationwide meatpacking workers do not have health insurance⁴
 - 44% of nationwide meatpacking workers have 1 or more children to care for⁵



TYPICAL WORKING SCHEDULE

- Shifts last between 10-14 hours a day, 6 days a week
 - During holidays, high demand forces many workers to exceed their 10-14 hour shifts
 - Employees working on holidays must commit to working the day before and the day after the holiday as well (because meatpacking plants often see a drop in attendance during those days, due to fatigue from longer shifts)
- Workers are permitted a 15-minute break for every 4 hours of work and a 30-minute meal break for every 12 hours of work, which is the minimum required by law
- The average turnover in meatpacking plants is between 80-100% a year (meaning that all or close to all workers will quit within 1 year)
 - One of the meatpacking plants we visited in central California had a turnover rate of over 150%
 - Turnover rates spike during harvest season when agriculture and field jobs open up

HAZARDS, INJURIES AND THREATS

Employees in the meatpacking industry experience one of the highest occupational injury rates in the U.S. The top three causes of injuries and accidents across the industry are lacerations, slips & falls, and ergonomic injuries.

01 — Lacerations :

This is most commonly from working with knives.

- Workers are required to wear knife-proof gloves and an arm protector, but the most common lacerations occur on the forearm, right above the arm protector.
- The risk of lacerations increases significantly during long shifts when the employee is fatigued.
- Risk of laceration is further exacerbated after more than 12 hours of standing and when conditions are humid, wet (from blood and washing blood), or chilled (employees on the Production Floor, where meat is sliced and packaged, work in a refrigerated room chilled to 36° Fahrenheit.)

02 — Slips, trips, and falls:

There are two main reasons that slips, trips and falls are acutely higher in the meatpacking industry compared to any other manufacturing, food processing, or other industrial occupation:

1. The floors and work surfaces are slippery from blood and other bodily liquids. Blood contains blood plasma and has a more gelatinous consistency than water, making surfaces extremely slippery. Even with frequent hosing down with water, some of the gelatinous plasma remains causing floors and surfaces to be extra slip-prone.
2. People slip, trip, or fall most commonly towards the ends of their shifts. Mental exhaustion and physical fatigue are the main causes for this. Shifts lasting 12-14 hours see higher slip, trip and fall rates than typical 10-12 hour shifts; and longer shifts, usually around holidays generating higher demand for meat spike slip and fall rates even further.

Slips, trips, and falls often result in severe injury, especially when mechanical or sharp equipment are involved, with these types of injuries averaging \$15,000 per accident.

03 — Ergonomic injuries:

Repetitive motions over 10-14 hour shifts lead to chronic ergonomic injuries, but workers rarely get compensated for these types of injuries.

- **Dull knives** require more force to be used effectively, causing more strain on the worker (the majority of work is done with dull knives, as it is expensive to replace them as frequently as required)
- **Repetitive motions:** there are 259 positions on the 'kill floor' where the cow is slaughtered and prepped for the 'production floor'. Roles on this factory line include:
 - Ear-cutter
 - De-horner
 - Tail bagger
 - De-hoofers
 - Head knocker
 - Skinner
 - Splitter (slicing the cow down the middle into two halves so that it can be sawed into smaller pieces on the production floor)

Workers repeat the same motion for their specific role for the entire duration of their shift, 6 days a week, sometimes for years. Ergonomic injuries are especially difficult to identify and get compensation for.

04 — Other hazards:

- **Falling cows:** Slaughtered cows are hung from a conveyor on the ceiling by their tendons with a chain. On occasion, the 2,000 lb animal's tendon will rip and a cow falls, which can be extremely dangerous when a worker is hit.
- **Dangerous machinery:** the machinery used in meatpacking facilities is meant to cut and grind meat and is extremely dangerous when in close contact with human flesh. It is also very easy for clothes, hair, and skin to get caught in them.

- **Saws** are the biggest risk factor on the 'fabrication floor', because the saws used are basic and don't have solid safety settings, like 'smart saws', which can detect motion and automatically turn off, reducing risk of injury. Most meat processing companies prefer to provide basic saws over 'smart saws', because the latter are more expensive.
- **Exposure to chemicals:** workers are exposed to ammonia, chlorine, carbon dioxide, hydrogen peroxide, and peracetic acid, causing skin rashes, eye, nose, and throat irritation, burns, coughs, eye irritation, and shortness of breath.⁶ Prolonged exposure could cause severe chronic illnesses such as cancer, which from a worker's compensation perspective is difficult to directly tie back to the working conditions and chemical exposure.

Meatpacking is known to OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) as a dangerous industry⁷ with disproportionately higher injury rates than any other industry.



PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

One of the most overlooked issues in the meatpacking industry's working conditions is severe psychological trauma among workers. Most employees on the 'kill floor', where the cow is slaughtered and prepped for the production floor, quit within their first 30 days of work for psychological reasons.

- New employees are trained to deal with the gruesome conditions on the kill floor, but according to employees we've spoken to, nothing can prepare someone for the sights, the putrid smells, and the sheer quantity of blood.
- The most severe psychological trauma occurs after a peer is badly injured, for example when a limb is lost. Employees must return to work, even after witnessing their co-worker's injury, and commonly struggle with trauma. To make matters worse, awareness of mental health issues and methods to deal with psychological trauma is low among this demographic.
- Workers on the kill floor often bring 3 changes of clothes so that they can change throughout the day. All workers on the kill floor finish the workday soaked in blood, and change into clean clothes before leaving the plant.



MISMANAGEMENT OF COVID-19

- If contracted with COVID-19, meatpacking facilities provide up to 80 hours of “COVID pay” (equivalent to 2 weeks of pay, which is often not enough given the duration of the illness, recovery time, and necessary quarantines)
- There is no compensation for long-term health issues related to COVID-19
- As of April 2021, an estimated 334,000 COVID-19 cases are traceable to meatpacking plants, costing \$11.2 billion to the economy,⁸ and representing disproportionately higher COVID rate than any other industry, including industries employing essential workers
- With the spread of COVID-19, meat processors began to blame the largely minority workers for bringing the virus to the workplace⁹

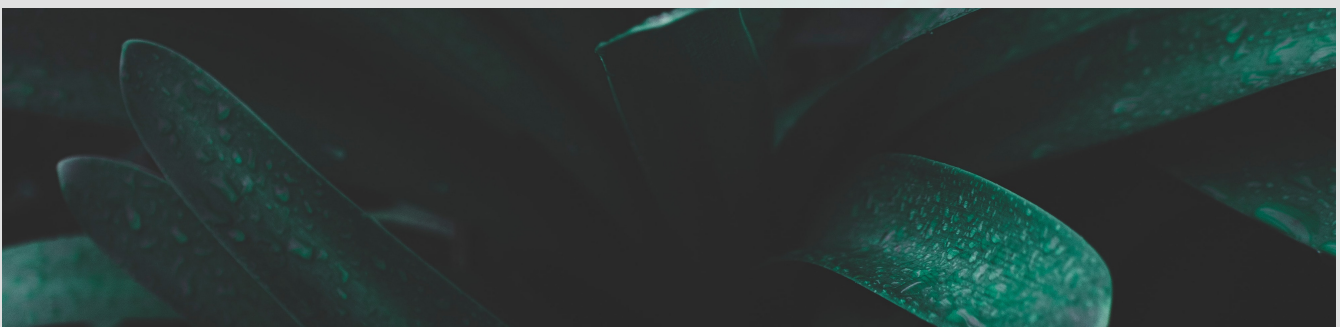


A CULTURE OF FEAR

- Most meatpacking facilities are protected with walls, barbed-wire fences, guards, security cameras, and patrol units, making it impossible to see inside the facility
- Some meatpacking facilities have undercover employees whose role is to identify and report suspicious behavior among regular employees (for example, pulling out a cellphone, or attempting to take a picture or a video)
- In many plants, cellphones are not allowed inside the facility, and bringing a cellphone past the gates is considered a fireable offence. This prevents photos and videos of mistreatment of both employees and animals
- Employees are often afraid to discuss their working conditions for fear that they will be punished or fired
- The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) specifically allows for "Protected Concerted Activity", i.e. actions by employees to advocate for better working conditions or terms of employment. It is illegal for an employer to take actions that prevent employees from freely engaging in Concerted Protected Activity, such as deliberately cultivating a strong culture of fear. Unfortunately, this is highly unlikely to get investigated or reported since the NLRB does not initiate an investigation without an employee formally filing a complaint.

MEATPACKING VS. AGRICULTURE & OTHER FACTORY WORK

- Not all meatpacking processors are bad: working conditions are often much better in smaller, family-owned facilities
- Alternative employment options for most meatpacking workers in California include packing houses (usually packing fruit, corn, and other agriculture products), field & farm work, and other factory line work
- During harvesting season, the meatpacking industry experiences a flood of turnover since meatpacking employees flock to the field work, which also have long hours and injuries, and don't provide benefits, but are preferable to most over meatpacking work
- Other factory line work can be tedious to varying degrees, but never involves blood, feces, and putrid smells, and is considered highly preferable over meat processing



SOURCES

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6. OSHA: "Meatpacking"

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8. UC Davis: "Meatpacking Plants Increased COVID-19 Cases in US Counties" (April 2021)

9. Food Policy: "COVID-19 morbidity and mortality in U.S. meatpacking counties" (April 2021)