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Latino laborers' hurts go unlisted

Study: Hispanic N.C. poultry workers don't understand rights

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A new survey of Latino poultry workers in Western North Carolina reveals that workers suffer high injury rates often unreported because they don't understand worker's rights.

Hispanic workers continue to report to the plant despite experiencing symptoms of musculoskeletal injuries, particularly carpal tunnel syndrome, caused by lifting, cutting, and tearing chicken meat as many as 40,000 times per shift, according to the survey conducted by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine and Centro Latino of Caldwell County.

"It's pretty clear that the food we eat is being produced by people that are suffering injuries to make a living," said Sara Quandt, the Wake Forest professor who led the study.

Quandt estimates more than 75 percent of Western North Carolina poultry workers are Hispanic -- primarily from Mexico and Guatemala.

Researchers found that 60 percent of the 200 Latino workers who live in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Surry, Wilkes or Yadkin counties suffered from musculoskeletal, respiratory or skin-related-injuries or illnesses.

But most said they continued to work out of fear that they'd lose their job if they reported the injury, the researchers found. Quandt also acknowledged that some of the workers may have improper immigration papers and therefore fear drawing any type of unwanted attention.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that approximately nine of every 100 N.C. poultry workers reported suffering from a work-related injury.

Poultry processing is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the meat products industry. Roughly 20,000 men and women in North Carolina work in poultry processing plants.

Juan Santos, a spokesman for the N.C. Department of Labor, said he could not comment on the Wake Forest study, but he said the findings were a concern since the industry-related injuries were twice as high as the state average.

Neil Drucker, of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, said it was unfair to compare their statistical information with that of the survey since each set of data was compiled under different guidelines.

Drucker added that of the 2,000 injury cases in 2003 that made poultry workers miss at least one day of work, only an estimated 40 were Hispanic.

But Quandt said the lack of data on Hispanic injuries only supports the study findings.

Dangerous Work

Wake Forest researchers found that 60 percent of Latino poultry workers reported symptoms of some type of illness or injury. The majority were musculoskeletal injuries, but workers also reported skin and respiratory problems.

Hands and arms -- 46 percent

Neck and back -- 36 percent

Leg and foot -- 23 percent of workers

Skin problems -- 22 percent

Respiratory -- 15 percent

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