

HEALTH POLICY FACT SHEET

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY



Fatal Injury Data

- ▶ In 2004, 5,703 workers died from fatal occupational injuries in the United States. Latinos accounted for 883 (15.5%) of these deaths, the most among any minority group.¹
- ▶ The work-related fatalities rate among Latinos had been declining since 2001 (from 891 to 791) before rising to 883 in 2004.¹
- ▶ During the years 1992-2002, Latino men accounted for an average of 94% of the fatal occupational injuries among Latino workers in the United States (Figure 1).²

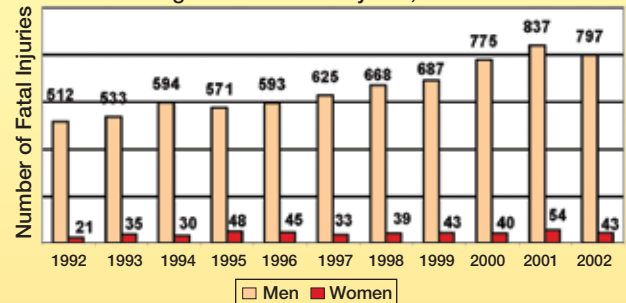
Nonfatal Injury Data

- ▶ In 2001, operators, fabricators, and laborers accounted for nearly 40% of all occupational injuries and illnesses, over 2.5 times more than the percentage of employed workers they represented (15.4%). In contrast, those employed in managerial and professional specialty jobs experienced only 6.4% of all occupational injuries and illnesses even though they accounted for 27.9% of employed workers.²
- ▶ Sprains and strains were the most common nonfatal occupational injuries, accounting for almost 43.6% of the total injuries in 2001 (669,889 cases).²

Costs

- ▶ Recently, injuries to agricultural workers have been estimated to cost between \$3.14 billion and \$13.99 billion. These costs are similar to those of job-related cancers (\$9.4 billion), and the overall costs of hepatitis C in 1997 (\$5.46 billion).³
- ▶ Whereas agriculture contributes roughly 1.8% of the gross national product, it accounts for roughly 3.5% of all occupational injury costs nationwide. Thus, agriculture contributes twice as much to the cost of national occupational injuries as it does to the national economic output.⁴
- ▶ The direct and indirect costs of California's occupational injuries and illnesses in 1992 were estimated to be \$20.7 billion. Injuries accounted for 86% of the costs. Although these numbers seem high, they are underestimates since they ignore several factors:⁵
 - ▶ Costs associated with pain and suffering
 - ▶ Home care provided by family members
 - ▶ The good likelihood that occupational injuries and illnesses are undercounted
- ▶ The cost of occupational injuries and illnesses in California is close to the cost of heart disease and stroke and is comparable to that of all cancers combined. Workers' compensation covers less than one-half of the cost.⁵
- ▶ Occupational injuries and illnesses are a major contributor to the total cost of health care in California.⁵

Figure 1. Number of Fatal Occupational Injuries Among Latino Workers by Sex, 1992-2002



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005²

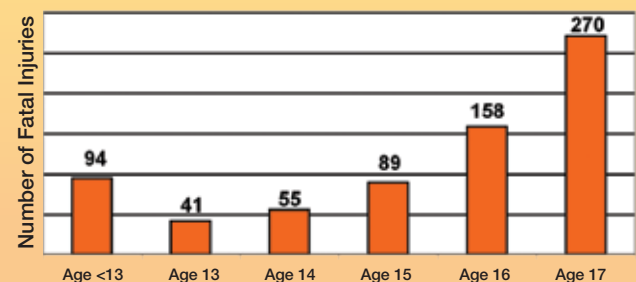
Children

- ▶ With some exceptions, the minimum age for employment is 14 years. In agriculture, however, children may be employed as young as 10 years old. Although the federal minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour, in some states employers may pay youths (under 20) a subminimum wage, which can be as little as \$4.25 per hour during their first 90 consecutive calendar days of employment.⁶
- ▶ In agriculture, child workers (ages 14 through 17) work an average of 31 hours per week in agriculture. Within that age group, American-born children work an average of 27 hours per week, while foreign-born children work an average of 35 hours per week.⁷

For the period 1992-2002:²

- ▶ 43.3% of fatal occupational injuries among workers aged 17 and younger occurred in the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry.
- ▶ There were 707 reported fatal occupational injuries among children. The majority of the fatalities were among 16- and 17-year-olds, but the under-13 age group also accounted for a significant percent (Figure 2).
- ▶ White, non-Latino youths accounted for 520 or 73.6% of fatal occupational injuries among workers aged 17 and younger. 39 fatal occupational injuries (5.5%) were reported for black, non-Latino youths, and 114 (16.1%) were reported for Latino youths.

Figure 2. Number and Distribution of Fatal Occupational Injuries by Age Among Young Workers, 1992-2002



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004²



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Industrial Labor

- ▶ Language and cultural factors can be barriers to receiving adequate safety training. Immigrant workers are less likely to report hazards on the job due to fear about job security, language issues, or lack of knowledge about their rights.⁸
- ▶ Farmworkers are not entitled to overtime pay under the Fair Labor Standards Act. As a consequence, agricultural employers have no financial incentive to limit the workweek to 40 hours.⁷
- ▶ Less than 10% of Latino workers in California are in managerial and professional occupations.⁸
- ▶ In California, immigrants are over-represented in dangerous industries and generally hold the more hazardous occupations within them: operators, laborers, and service workers.⁹
- ▶ Latino construction workers are less likely than non-Latino construction workers to have health insurance, although union membership improves the situation. More than 1 million Latino construction workers lacked health insurance in 2003.¹⁰
- ▶ On a national level, there has been a documented increase in Latino deaths in construction. While the proportion of Latinos in construction grew 20%-30% between 1996 and 1999, there was a 68% increase in the number who died in construction accidents.⁹
- ▶ Latinos account for 34.8% of the 800,000 textile workers and 26.8% of the 3 million cleaning and building service workers.¹⁰
- ▶ Agriculture and construction, two of the three industries with the highest fatality rates in the United States, have the highest proportion of Latino workers.^{11,12}

Health Issues

- ▶ Musculoskeletal disorders are the most commonly reported health problem among farmworkers. Daily activities include prolonged stooped labor using short-handled implements, frequent lifting of heavy boxes or buckets overhead to fill trucks, climbing ladders wearing heavy picking bags, and fast-paced sorting in packing sheds.¹⁴

Pesticides

- ▶ The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that there are 10,000 to 20,000 incidents of physician-diagnosed pesticide illnesses and injuries per year in farm work (while recognizing that this is a conservative estimate because of the widespread pattern of underreporting).¹³
- ▶ Acute symptoms of pesticide exposure range from relatively mild headaches to fatigue, nausea, skin rashes, eye irritation, burns, paralysis, and even death. Chronic illnesses and those with delayed onsets, such as cancer, which may only appear years after exposure to pesticides, can also result.¹³
- ▶ EPA has reported that of the 1.2 billion pounds of pesticides used in the United States annually, about 950 million pounds of which is used in the agriculture industry. Farmworkers are among the primary populations exposed to these pesticides.¹³
- ▶ Children may be exposed to pesticides by doing farm work, by eating fruits and vegetables directly from the fields, by being caught in the drift from field applications of pesticides, or by direct contact with treated plants and soil. Children are more vulnerable than adults are to the effects of pesticides. For example, some pesticides pose a greater risk to infants and children because they breathe more and eat more than adults per unit of body weight, and their bodies and internal organs are still developing, which makes them much more susceptible to the effects of pesticides.¹³

This fact sheet was reviewed by J. Paul Leigh, PhD, Professor of Health Economics, UC Davis Medical School.

The information presented in this fact sheet was assembled by Xóchitl Castañeda, California-Mexico Health Initiative Director, with the support of the CMHI staff.

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