

Hispanic Employees in the Workplace

Higher Rate of Fatalities

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the higher fatality and injury rates among the Hispanic population in the United States, whether legal immigrants, citizens, or illegal immigrants; reviews the current government and private industry regulations and safety programs; proposes additional legislation or programs; and describes the role of the occupational and environmental health nurse in reducing injuries and fatalities in this population.

As a country founded on immigration and considered the “melting pot” of the world, it is appropriate to address the needs of workers of all races, cultures, and languages in the workplace. Yet, Hispanic worker fatality rates appear to be increasing, even as fatal work injury rates for most other U.S. workers are declining. Hispanic workers are both underrepresented in the scientific, research, and academic communities (i.e., safety research and education) and overrepresented in incidence of fatalities and participation in high hazard industries (Brunette, 2004).

Hispanic employees face barriers not understood by non-Hispanic White and other majority ethnic groups. Some of these barriers include language differences, educational attainment, literacy, and fear from being in the United States illegally, being reported to immigration, losing employment, and being deported. These hardships affect workplace safety by negatively impacting accident and injury reporting, tolerating inadequate training, and continuing unawareness of employees’ rights in this country (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

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GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Most literature about Hispanic workers is focused on their lack of access to health care, health disparities, and lack of sufficient health insurance (Brunette, 2004). Few publications address specific issues facing Hispanic workers in the United States today, especially from an occupational and environmental health nursing perspective. The American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) has produced one of the most comprehensive documents on the hazards facing Hispanic workers and recommendations for change (AFL-CIO, 2005). This report, however, is self-serving, geared toward union activities and union growth.

The leading publication for occupational and environmental health nurses, the *AAOHN Journal*, has provided articles about working with minority and vulnerable populations in the workplace as well as Spanish/English tools to assist occupational and environmental health nurses in communicating with Hispanic employees; however, the issue of higher injury and fatality rates has not received specific attention in this journal nor from the Association of Occupational Health Professionals (AOHP). With the broad knowledge of health and safety required for competent occupational and environmental health nurses and a lack of a comprehensive directive on this issue, it is not surprising this topic has not been specifically addressed by these organizations. For example, Brunette (2004) discussed the need for research in one of

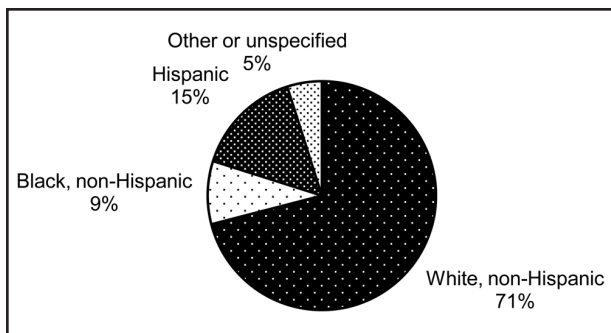


Figure 1. Number and distribution of fatal occupational injuries by race and ethnicity among Hispanic and non-Hispanic workers, 2001. (Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2004a.)

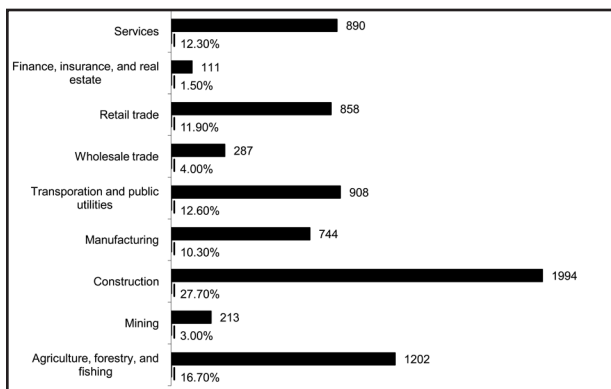


Figure 3. Distribution and number of fatal occupational injuries among Hispanic workers by industry, 1992 to 2002. (Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2004c.)

the occupations with the highest rate of Hispanic fatalities, construction:

To date, very little construction safety and health research has been conducted involving Hispanic workers. While there might be some ongoing research projects targeted to construction Hispanic workers' safety, their dissemination process may be quite poor. Lack of publication in peer reviewed journals and in other relevant sources of information gives the impression that minimal or no research activities targeted to the Hispanic construction workforce in the United States are being undertaken by the research community. (p. 244)

High-Risk Occupations and Industries

Data from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 2004a) indicate higher fatal work injury rates for Hispanic workers than for other racial and ethnic groups (Fig. 1). The extent to which factors other than occupation may contribute to racial and ethnic differences in work-related injuries has not been adequately explored in the public health literature (Strong & Zimmerman, 2005).

According to a recent study of census data by the Pew Hispanic Center (2006a), only 16% of Latino high school graduates earn a 4-year college degree by age 29,

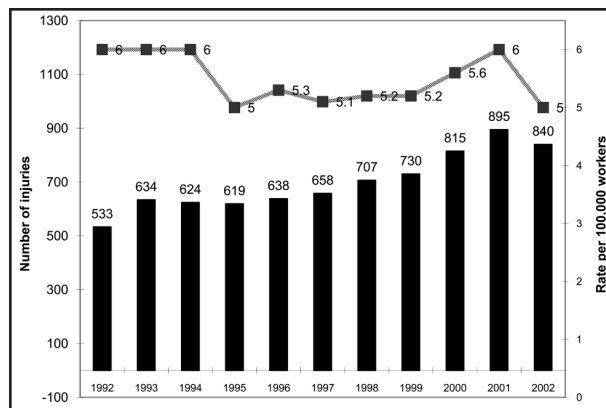


Figure 2. Number and rate of fatal occupational injuries among employed Hispanic workers, 1992 to 2002. (Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2004b.)

compared to 37% of non-Hispanic Whites and 21% of African Americans. Less formal education often results in lower wages at more labor-intensive occupations such as hotel housekeeper, construction worker, day laborer, or agricultural worker. College degrees offer more opportunities for professional jobs in fields such as nursing, teaching, and accounting.

Although overall workplace fatalities have dropped 20% in the past decade, workplace fatalities among Hispanic workers have risen almost 35% during the same period (Fig. 2) (Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA], n.d.b). Data from NIOSH (2004c) identify the industries with the highest risk of injuries and fatalities for Hispanic workers (i.e., construction, agriculture, forestry, fishing, transportation, and public utilities). The largest percentage of fatal occupational injuries among Hispanic workers was in the construction industry (27.7% or 1,994 cases) (Fig. 3) (NIOSH, 2004c).

According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (2002) in a report addressing efforts to improve the safety of day laborers, large numbers (not yet quantified, but estimated at 1 to 2 million) of immigrants, many Hispanic, are employed in an "informal" economy including day laborers, sweatshop garment workers, and domestic workers. These workers have few protections or resources and their employment is characterized by high turnover, poor training, and lack of employer accountability. Employers receive no clear, centralized guidance from OSHA on the legal responsibilities of temporary staffing agencies or their clients to properly ensure the safety of the day laborers they employ (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). For example, the majority of the nonprofit and local government agencies that work with day laborers state that few, if any, of them receive personal protective equipment or safety training (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Immigration Status and Literacy

The Pew Hispanic Center (2006b) estimates 7.2 million illegal unauthorized workers live in the United States. An unauthorized worker is an individual who resides in the United States but is not a U.S. citizen; rather, the

worker is an illegal alien who has not been admitted for permanent residence and is not authorized for temporary work. These unauthorized workers represent nearly 5% of the entire U.S. work force. The construction industry is the largest employer of unauthorized workers with 1.4 million unauthorized workers, 12% of the construction work force. The next largest industry employing unauthorized workers is the hospitality industry.

According to an AFL-CIO (2007) report:

Immigrant workers have a disproportionate rate of injuries, illnesses, and fatalities in the workplace largely because they are hired to do the most undesirable and dangerous jobs at the lowest wages. They often do not know what rights they have or what laws protect them and they receive no training in safety and health. Language and cultural barriers make it difficult for them to learn their rights and those who lack immigration status are particularly fearful of speaking out. Employers frequently view immigrant workers as disposable and easy to exploit. The increase in fatalities among immigrant workers, particularly Hispanic and Latino workers, has been alarming. Since 1992, when these data were first collected in the BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, the number of fatalities to Hispanic workers has increased by 65 percent, from 508 fatalities in 1992 to 840 in 2002.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The National Conference on Immigrant Workers' Safety and Health (2004) brought together leading activists and researchers from around the country for discussions on how to provide better protection for immigrant workers. Participants at the conference developed a list of strategies they found most successful in working with immigrant workers. These strategies included outreach and training programs about health and safety laws and regulations for employers with immigrant workers. Specific programs included integrating OSHA training into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, computer classes, and other skill-based training.

Safety Regulations

OSHA's mission is to ensure the safety and health of America's workers by setting and enforcing standards; providing training, outreach, and education; establishing partnerships; and encouraging continual improvement in workplace safety and health (OSHA, n.d.a). OSHA has been effective in meeting its mission; it reduced workplace fatalities by more than 60% and occupational injuries and illnesses by 40% between 1971 and 2005 (OSHA, n.d.a).

Several standards, enacted by the U.S. government, assist employers in reducing hazards, providing a safe workplace for all workers, and assisting employees in maintaining their health while at work. An employer must provide safety information to its employees using both a language and a vocabulary that employees understand (OSHA, 2007). For example, if an employee does not speak or comprehend English, instruction is to be provided in a language the employee can understand. Em-

ployers may also provide English-language instruction to non-English-speaking employees, which, over time, may lessen the need to provide safety training in other languages (OSHA, 2007).

The OSHA Training Institute offers several programs to assist Hispanic employers and workers to improve their knowledge of safe and healthful work practices. Examples of these programs are seminars on safety issues in construction, excavation, fall arrest systems, and demolition. Education centers are located throughout the United States and offer classes in work safety; training grants to nonprofit organizations to train employers and employees, using Spanish scripts and teaching aids, to recognize, avoid, and prevent safety and health hazards in their workplaces; and a resource center loan program, offering more than 35 video titles in Spanish on a variety of safety topics (OSHA, n.d.b).

Safety Programs and Language Barriers

Employees are responsible for learning, understanding, and complying with workplace policies regarding safety and reporting injuries and hazards. For a workplace safety program to be successful, employee participation is vital. Employees are responsible for maintaining a safe workstation and reporting workplace hazards and unsafe conditions (Rogers, 2003).

To assist in removing the language barrier in the workplace, OSHA-appointed Hispanic/ESL coordinators in each of the 10 OSHA regions to assist employers, small businesses, trade associations, union locals, community and faith-based groups, and Hispanic workers with outreach, education, and training (OSHA, n.d.b).

The Electronic Library for Construction Occupational Safety and Health (eLCOSH), funded by NIOSH, provides English and Spanish education materials. The materials are available on the Internet for distribution by trainers and health educators (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Numerous educational and training materials have been translated into Spanish; however, if Hispanic workers have limited literacy, the content will not be understood. According to the Pfizer Clear Health Communication Initiative, written materials for workers with low health literacy should be aimed at the 6th-grade reading level; current health care materials and brochures are written at a 10th-grade reading level or above. Simple words and short sentences, larger type, and generous white space should be used. Complicated or technical words should be replaced with simpler choices. Videos in workers' primary language (or in English for those who speak English but are illiterate) may be more effective tools if limited literacy exists (Pfizer, 2003).

Depending on size and geographic region, employers may have limited access to professional interpreter services and may have to rely on bilingual Hispanic employees to provide training to non-English-speaking Hispanic employees. However, if the bilingual employee is not knowledgeable about health and safety issues, the training will be ineffective. Additionally, if bilingual employees are not available, it may be difficult to ascertain

Table
Resources for Meeting the Needs of Hispanic Workers

Organization	Website	Type of Information
Occupational Safety and Health Administration	www.osha.gov	Safety information
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health	www.cdc.gov/niosh	Research/new programs
American Association of Occupational Health Nurses, Inc.	www.aaohn.org	Professional tools
Office of Minority Health	www.omhrc.gov	Information on specific ethnic groups
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	www.hhs.gov	Health information and additional resources

the appropriateness and quality of Spanish safety training materials. One fourth of all fatalities investigated by OSHA were in some way related to language or cultural barriers for Hispanic workers (Blagojevich, 2007).

THE ROLE OF THE OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NURSE

The occupational and environmental health nurse's role is to address cultural differences, provide appropriate safety programs, promote health literacy, and address language barriers that affect safety and health in the workplace. Any safety program targeted toward Hispanic workers must be in a language they can understand with written materials they can read; all consistent with their cultural norms.

Cultural Differences

The occupational and environmental health nurse can assist Hispanic, non-English-speaking workers to understand the language, expectations, culture, and customs of the United States. Some interventions to assist Hispanic workers to achieve this goal include coordinating on-site ESL classes and working with various community and social organizations to help workers understand their rights and responsibilities in the United States.

According to a Kaiser report (Perkins, 2003), the growth of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups, each with its own cultural traits and health profiles, presents a challenge to the health care delivery system in this country. Providers and workers each bring learned patterns of language and culture to the health care experience that must be transcended to achieve equal access and quality health care. Cultural competence means listening to workers to discover their beliefs regarding health and illness. To provide culturally appropriate care, nurses need to understand workers' culturally influenced health behaviors.

The occupational and environmental health nurse can apply the principles of cultural competence when interacting with Hispanic employees and their family members in the workplace. Adapting to different cultural beliefs and practices requires flexibility and a respect for others' viewpoints. For example, preventive health care is not the

norm for most Hispanics, related to the Hispanic "here and now" orientation, as opposed to a future-planning orientation. Women participate in more screening activities than do men; however, women's breast and pelvic cancer screenings may be seen as intrusive and embarrassing and may be delayed or not performed. Many Hispanic men are resistant to the concept of health screening (Rhode Island Department of Health, 2007).

Safety Programs

The interdisciplinary collaboration of professionals working together is a component of any safety program. The team may include the occupational and environmental health nurse, an occupational physician, a safety officer, an industrial hygienist, management, employees, and an ergonomist. Once the interdisciplinary team has identified workplace hazards, programs can be developed and implemented by team members to minimize these hazards in the workplace.

Specifically for this population, the safety team should assess Hispanic employees' understanding of workplace health and safety through interpreters, written or oral surveys, and observation of employees complying with safety rules in the workplace. OSHA commissioned a report to explore the issue of hazard communication in general and Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) in particular. This report advised that, on average, literate workers understood only 60% of the information on MSDSs (Bouchard, 2007). A lack of understanding regarding the hazards and protections required, provided, or recommended at the workplace likely caused preventable injuries and illnesses. The safety team can assist in providing MSDSs in Spanish; teaching Hispanic workers how to interpret MSDSs and where to seek immediate health care in the event of a chemical exposure; and assessing workers' understanding of appropriate precautions, controls, and personal protective equipment for the chemicals to which they are exposed in the workplace.

Literacy and Language Barriers

The occupational and environmental health nurse can work with the employer to provide ESL programs,

whether on-site or at local community agencies, helping Hispanic workers become increasingly literate in the English language. Ideally, these programs could be offered at the worksite during work hours and be paid for by the employer. Insisting, whenever possible, on the use of English in the workplace would reinforce ESL classroom learning. Moving Hispanic workers toward literacy has benefits for both employers and employees.

In addition to reducing misunderstanding of workplace safety and injuries, workplace literacy provides employers with profit by increasing employees' skills. Employees with better basic skills tend to learn more quickly when they receive job-specific and technical training, saving time and money and improving performance and productivity. Other benefits include reduced errors, better health and safety, reduced production waste, and increased customer and employee retention (Conference Board of Canada, 2007).

Additional benefits to employees of improving workplace skills include completing tasks quickly, improving morale and self-esteem, improving collaboration with co-workers or teams, improving reading, writing, numeric, communication, and problem-solving skills, increasing the chances of being promoted or transferred into new positions, and increasing pay or responsibility (Conference Board of Canada, 2007).

RESOURCES FOR THE OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NURSE

The occupational and environmental health nurse should provide culturally appropriate information to employees about their rights and responsibilities under the state workers' compensation laws. Some states, including Illinois and California, have their workers' compensation handbooks available in Spanish.

The American Association of Occupational Health Nurses, Inc. (AAOHN) has a course designed to help occupational health professionals develop the skills required to deliver culturally appropriate care to multicultural workers and worker populations. Module One provides an overview of cultural competence in health care and tools to increase self-awareness of cultural issues. This module concludes with a list of references and resources that can be accessed to address the needs of specific cultural groups. Module Two describes strategies for providing care to multicultural individuals and groups and for moving organizations to be more culturally sensitive (AAOHN, n.d.).

Government and organization websites have information and materials to assist the occupational and environmental health nurse in meeting the needs of the Hispanic population in the workplace (Table).

SUMMARY

A consistent and comprehensive approach to removing barriers to workplace safety across the United States could eliminate or reduce a significant number of workplace accidents and injuries. Further research focused on understanding Hispanic workers' occupational, social, economic, and cultural background, using a participatory approach and proper translation methods, is a starting

IN SUMMARY

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Higher Rate of Fatalities

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- 1 Hispanic workers' fatality rates are increasing as most other U.S. workers' fatality rates are declining.
- 2 Hispanic employees face language, literacy, and education barriers. Among those with illegal immigration status, fear of losing employment and being deported prevents many from filing complaints about lax workplace safety or reporting injuries.
- 3 Regulations have been enacted to reduce hazards, and programs have been developed to improve knowledge of a safe and healthy work environment for Hispanic employees and their employers.
- 4 The role of occupational and environmental health nurses is to address cultural differences, provide appropriate safety programs, promote health literacy, and address language barriers that affect safety and health in the workplace.

point for reducing workplace fatalities (Brunette, 2004). The task of providing workplace safety training in an employee's native language is daunting. At the same time, learning a new language in a new culture takes time. Although the occupational and environmental health nurse and employer can assist non-English-speaking employees become literate, steps must be taken in the interim to provide safety training for non-English-speaking employees using interpreters, language phone lines, bilingual co-workers, or materials in employees' native languages.

Universities, working with communities to reduce health disparities, can remove language barriers and improve access to health care through programs such as ESL and OSHA training in Spanish.

By collaborating, occupational and environmental health nurses, government agencies, private organizations, unions, employees, and employers can provide a consistent and comprehensive approach to reducing injuries among Hispanic workers in all occupations and make U.S. workplaces safe and healthy for all.

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