

Safer Jobs for a Better Economy

Latino Workers Still Face Highest Rate of Death on the Job

Summary

The President's 2013 Budget falls short of the investments needed to build a better economy, most notably the need to improve the safety of America's workplaces to reduce death and injury on the job. Congress should appropriate additional resources for fundamental worker protections.

Latino Employment Statistics for February

According to the [latest report](#) from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), encouraging employment growth continued in February. Net job growth was 227,000 and the unemployment rate remained at 8.3%. Latino employment grew by 115,000, while the number of unemployed Latinos also increased slightly. The Latino unemployment rate was 10.7%, a slight increase from January when it was 10.5%. Still, the Latino labor force participation rate, 66.5%, continues to be the highest of any demographic group.

Unsafe Workplaces Hurt Workers and the Economy

Since the recession officially ended, NCLR has tracked opportunities for Latino workers in several American industries with modest job growth, from [transportation](#) and [retail](#) to [health care](#), pointing out areas of promise for Latino workers who are represented in significant or growing numbers in these sectors. However, these reports also underscore that an economic upswing that puts people back to work in low-wage, low-quality jobs is not a true recovery. Building a better economy requires the creation of high-quality jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and benefits, keep workers safe on the job, and provide opportunities for career mobility.

Perhaps the most obvious indicator of job quality is the one with the most direct impact on workers themselves: the physical conditions under which they labor. Ironically, the productivity of the U.S. in the global economy masks the fact that the typical American worker is at greater risk of death from a work-related injury than workers in many other "established market economies," including the United Kingdom, Germany, and France.¹ According to calculations based on International Labour Organization statistics, 5.6 out of every 100,000 U.S. workers were victims of fatal occupational injuries in 2006, compared to 0.8 in the United Kingdom, 3.6 in Germany, and 3.0 in France.²

Latinos are more likely than White or Black workers to die from an injury on the job. In 2009 (the most recent data available) 713 Latinos were killed on the job, the majority of them immigrants. That year the fatal occupational injury rate for Latinos was 4.0 fatalities per 100,000 workers, compared to 3.5 and 3.1 for White and Black workers, respectively.³ While this is an improvement over previous years, preventable worker injuries and fatalities continue to occur, even in sectors such as transportation, which has the potential for significant job

growth after the reauthorization of the federal transportation law, [SAFETEA-LU](#), before current funding expires on March 31, 2012.⁴

The concentration of Latinos in hazardous jobs partly explains their relatively high risk of fatal injury.⁵ A combination of factors, including failure by employers to minimize hazards and provide adequate safety equipment and training, the underreporting of injuries, and in some cases active punishment of whistleblowers, exacerbate the risks that Latinos and other low-wage immigrant workers face on the job.

As illustrated in Reynaldo's story below, the harm of job-related injuries extends far beyond physical pain and suffering. Workers and their families often endure long-term consequences to their health, financial well-being, and family stability. Workplace injuries, illnesses, and fatalities also take a toll on the economy at large. In 2005, low-income workers in poor-quality jobs incurred a disproportionate share of workplace injuries, illnesses, and fatalities, which cost the American economy \$163.2 billion.⁶

Latino Worker Voice: Reynaldo's Back Injury

Excerpt from [We Needed the Work: Latino Worker Voices in the New Economy](#)



For eight years, Reynaldo and his sons remodeled houses for a Virginia-based real estate development company. From the beginning, they struggled to get their employer to pay them higher wages and provide the tools and safety equipment that they needed. In Reynaldo's words:

We paid for our tools, including the gas for our cars. Our boss didn't give us anything. We told him that he needed to put in for the tools and the safety equipment—he only got mad. He told us, "I am not Santa Claus to be bringing you presents."

Then in May 2010, Reynaldo fell from a roof and fractured his spine while on the job. He did not have health insurance, but his employer promised to help with the resulting medical bills. However, after his injury, Reynaldo and his sons were abruptly fired, and their employer did not follow through on his promise to provide financial assistance. Three months later, Reynaldo described his accident and how it has affected his life:

I've gone three months without work and without a single cent. My sons are supporting me because I can't work. This has affected me tremendously. I feel that right now I am doing badly, and I'm just stuck here in my house with

my medicines and pills for my pain.

Reynaldo's injury and his employer's refusal to submit a workers' compensation claim have eroded his physical and emotional health, his financial stability, and his family's well-being.

Read more of Reynaldo's story and other firsthand accounts from Latino workers at www.nclr.org/workervoices.

The President's 2013 Budget Doesn't Do Enough to Improve Workplace Safety and Health

Workplace health and safety can be improved through a range of administrative, legislative, and regulatory changes. One of the most effective ways to ensure that growing industries adhere to high standards for job quality is through the federal government's vigorous enforcement of labor laws. Without a vigilant and nimble Department of Labor, unscrupulous employers are more likely to violate the law, resulting in substandard working conditions and more injuries on the job. The DOL's Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) is charged with preventing work-related injuries, illnesses, and death. In addition to enforcing federal health and safety laws in the workplace, OSHA offers technical assistance to employers to improve their compliance with federal standards.

In his [Budget for Fiscal Year 2013](#), released on February 13, 2012, President Obama requests that Congress appropriate \$21 million for OSHA safety and health standards, a modest boost over the FY2012 appropriations, which was \$20 million. However, on federal enforcement, the president requested a slightly lower amount for 2013: \$207 million, compared to \$208 million for 2012. Similarly, for OSHA compliance assistance activities, the president's request is \$73 million, while \$76 million was appropriated for 2012.

In an era in which the federal budget is highly politicized, it is not surprising that funding for OSHA is near 2012 levels. However, the capacity of OSHA to enforce current laws in an increasingly complex labor market is already compromised. Without further infusion of resources, this agency will be unable to monitor new hazards as they crop up in existing and fast-growing industries. Furthermore, high fatality rates for Latinos may continue if OSHA is unable to develop linguistically appropriate legal resources for limited-English-proficient workers, and actively track complaints from third parties, including community-based organizations.

At a time when policymakers are focused on job creation, Congress should carefully consider the new economy that American workers, businesses—and government—are building. Stronger investments in the enforcement of basic health and safety standards will ensure safer workplaces, stronger families, and a viable economic recovery.

Endnotes

¹ Päivi Hämäläinen, Jukka Takala, and Kaija Leena Saarela, "Global estimates of occupational accidents," *Safety Science* 44 (2006): 145,
http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/accidis/est_method.pdf (accessed September 2008).

² Ibid.

³ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Revisions to the 2009 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) Counts," http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/cfoi/cfoi_revised09.pdf (accessed February 2012).

⁴ "Lee County traffic fatality: worker killed on Interstate 85," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, February 28, 2012, <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2012/02/28/1950592/lee-county-traffic-fatality-worker.html> (accessed February 2012).

⁵ Catherine Singley, *Fractures in the Foundation: The Latino Worker's Experience in an Era of Declining Job Quality* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2009).

⁶ J. Paul Leigh, "Costs of Occupational Injury and Illnesses Combining all Industries" (Seminar for Western Center for Agriculture Health and Safety, 2008), agcenter.ucdavis.edu/seminar/flyer/2009/Leigh_Nov3_2008.ppt (accessed May 2011).