

Summary

Latinos* are disproportionately employed in the poultry processing industry, which feeds America's demand for chicken. A new rule proposed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) threatens to hurt Latino workers by speeding up production lines in what is already a dangerous work environment.

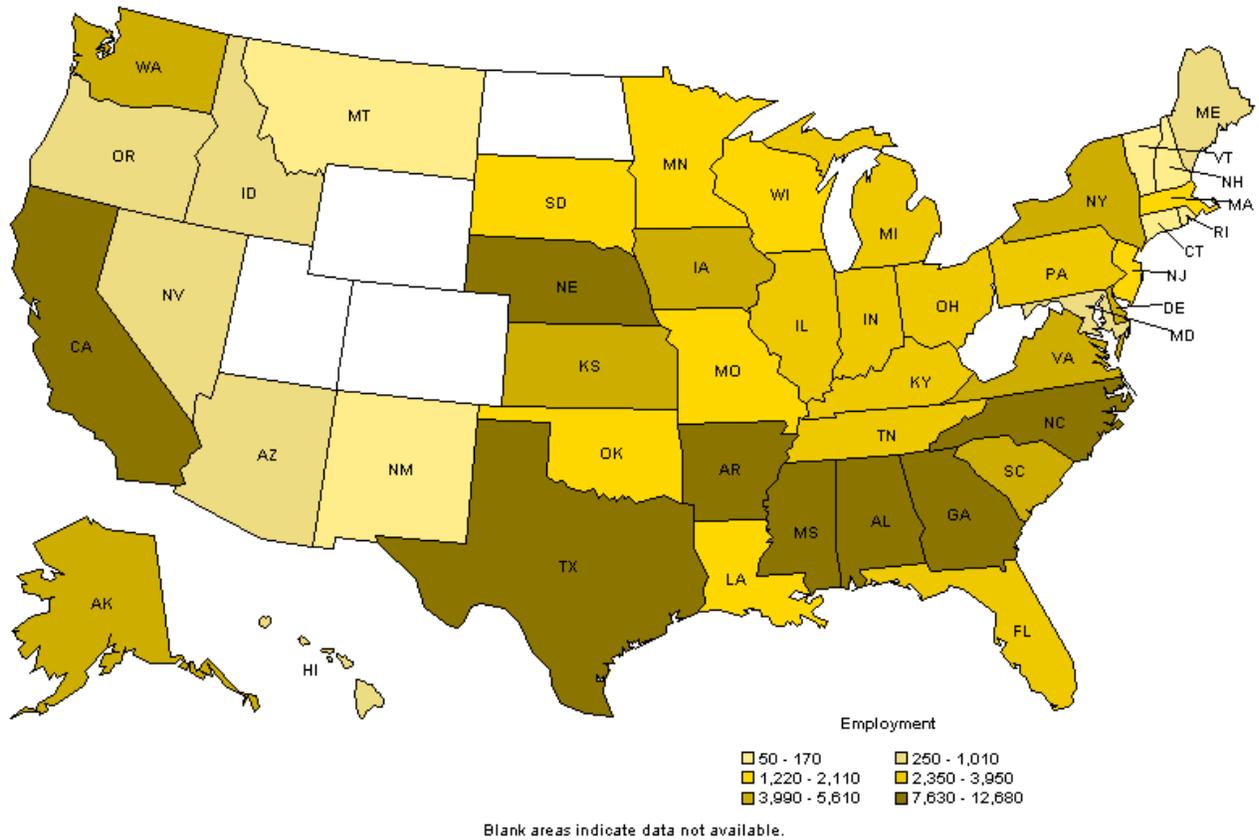
Economic Footprint of America's Poultry Industry

The poultry processing industry has a significant footprint in the U.S. economy. According to the USDA, sales from the poultry industry totaled \$46.1 billion in 2006. This is due in large part to a shift in American consumption habits over the past two decades away from beef and pork and toward chicken. Poultry alone accounts for 36.7% of American meat consumption per capita, with red meat products (including beef, veal, lamb, mutton, and pork) composing 55% and fish composing 8.2% of individual consumption per year. Altogether, Americans consumed [42.7 billion pounds of poultry](#) in 2007.

Employment in poultry processing—in which chickens are slaughtered, butchered, and packed to sell for human consumption—is concentrated in a handful of states. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of jobs in cutting and trimming, which account for about a quarter of the jobs in poultry processing. Alabama employs the greatest number of cutters and trimmers (12,680), followed by Nebraska (12,090) and Georgia (10,600). The states with the largest employment of slaughterers and meat packers are Texas (8,960), North Carolina (7,960), and Minnesota (6,890). Figure 2 shows state employment of slaughterers and meat packers.

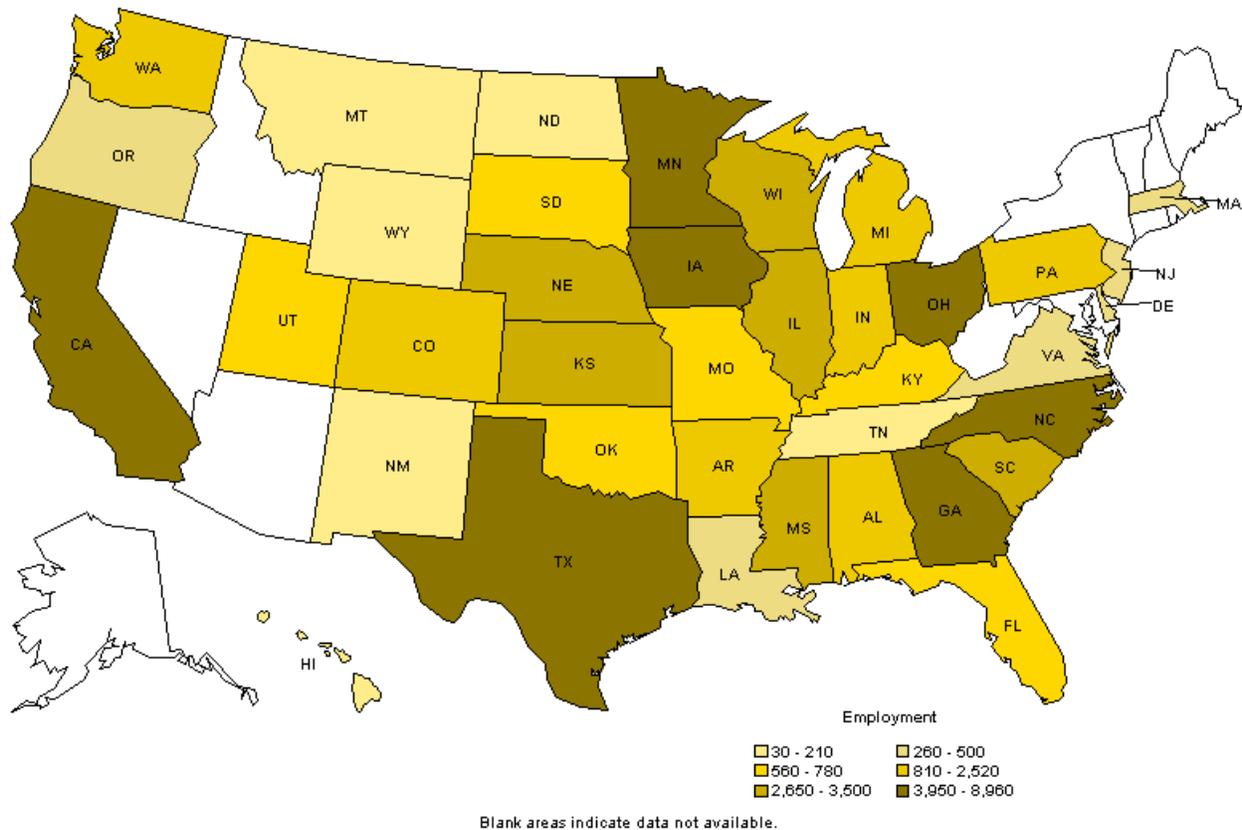
* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

Figure 1. Employment of Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers by State, May 2011



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics*, Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes513022.htm> (accessed May 2012).

Figure 2. Employment of Slaughterers and Meat Packers by State, May 2011

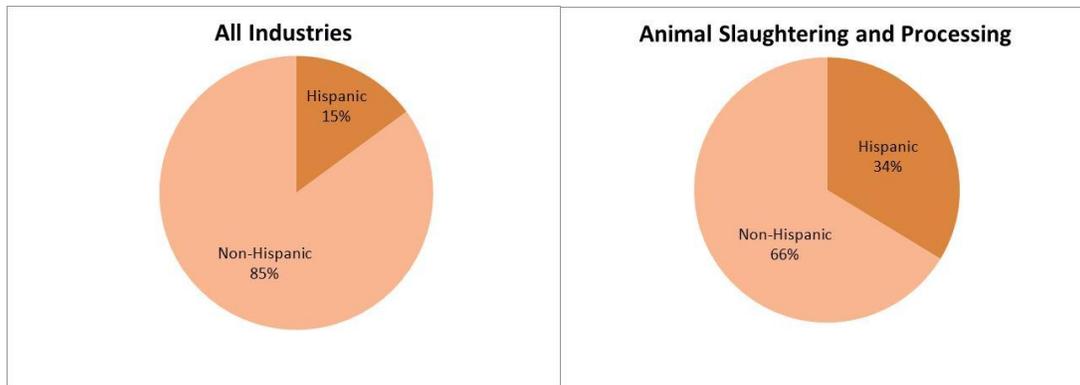


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics*, Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes513023.htm> (accessed May 2012).

Latino Contributions to the Poultry Industry

Animal slaughtering and processing industries employ approximately 532,000 people in the U.S. Latinos account for 34% of workers in this industry, which is more than twice their share of the overall workforce (see Figure 3). A large share of poultry processing workers are immigrants, documented and undocumented. Women are overrepresented in labor-intensive occupations such as cutting and trimming carcasses.

Figure 3. Share of Hispanic Workers by Industry



Source: National Council of La Raza (NCLR) calculation using U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*, 3-Year Estimates, 2008–2010, Public Use Microdata Sample.

Poverty-Level Wages

The high demand for poultry in the U.S. does not translate into good wages for the workers who prepare chicken for consumption. Wages for the three major occupations in poultry processing are between \$11 and \$12 per hour, as seen in Table 1. In other words, workers in these jobs were about at the federal poverty threshold, which was \$22,113 per year in 2010 for a two-adult, two-child household. (A more comprehensive measure of poverty, the [supplemental poverty measure](#), puts the poverty line at \$24,343 in 2010.) Even at these low wages, some poultry processing workers are not even paid what they are owed by their employers; a [survey conducted in 2000](#) by the Department of Labor (DOL) found that 100% of poultry plants surveyed had not paid their workers for all hours worked and 35% had “impermissible” deductions from workers’ paychecks for safety equipment, such as ear plugs, that employers were legally required to provide at no cost.

Table 1. Wage Estimates of Workers in Animal Slaughtering and Processing, May 2011

Occupation	Median hourly wage	Mean hourly wage	Annual mean wage
Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers	\$11.03	\$11.35	\$23,610
Slaughterers and Meat Packers	\$11.36	\$11.68	\$24,300
Cooling and Freezing Equipment Operators and Tenders	\$11.42	\$12.06	\$25,090

Injuries and Illnesses Common, Though Widely Underreported

Poultry processing is designed to maximize production of ready-to-cook chicken in a short amount of time. Under current regulations, production lines can move at a rate of 140 birds per minute. Workers on the poultry processing line are assigned specific tasks that they repeat at rapid speed for their entire shifts, including slaughtering, sorting, cleaning, inspecting, trimming, cutting, and packaging. Most of this work is performed standing up. As a result, musculoskeletal injuries to the hands, wrists, and arms, including carpal tunnel syndrome, as well as the back are perceived to be very common.

In addition to line speed, other hazardous conditions in poultry processing plants contribute to injuries and illnesses for workers. According to Sarah Quandt, a leading expert in qualitative research in health and safety among Latino poultry workers, “dampness, animal proteins, contamination from poultry excreta, feathers, and other organic substances, knives and scissors in crowded conditions” are connected to dermatological, respiratory, and other illnesses. A study of Latino poultry workers in North Carolina by Quandt and other researchers found that [60% of workers had symptoms](#) of these injuries or illnesses. Several other studies, including a [major investigation](#) by the Charlotte Observer first published in 2008, confirm the gruesome conditions and prevalence of injuries and illnesses among poultry workers.

Despite the body of evidence demonstrating injuries and illnesses and hazardous conditions in poultry processing plants, data collected by the federal government wildly understates the problems identified by outside studies. [DOL data](#) shows an elevated level of reported injuries among poultry workers, at 5.9 reported injuries per 100 workers compared to 4.4 reported injuries per 100 workers in all manufacturing industries. Yet, it is widely suspected that most injuries in poultry processing go unreported by employees and businesses. In fact, underreporting of injuries is common in [many low-wage industries](#). National surveys, workers compensation records, and medical records fail to account for between one-third and two-thirds of all workplace injuries, according to various estimates.¹

A Vulnerable Workforce

Poultry workers face multiple barriers to reporting injuries and receiving the care that they need. Lack of job security, language barriers, immigration status, and the absence of a union are all factors that prevent many workers from raising concerns with supervisors or inspectors. Latino poultry workers tend to face multiple barriers, since many of them are immigrants who may have limited English proficiency or insecure immigration status. According to estimates from the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, only about 30% of poultry processing plants are unionized, meaning that individual workers are more vulnerable to retaliation by supervisors if they complain about hazardous conditions or take time off to tend to an injury. Jorge’s story, below, describes the pressures he encountered on the processing line to keep quiet about injuries.

Jorge's Plight in Poultry

Chicken processing is a gruesome business. Workers known as “chicken hangers” face especially strenuous and dangerous working conditions. One of these workers, Jorge, worked as a chicken hanger—which includes both “live hangers” who hang live chickens at the start of the slaughter line and “rehangers” who hang carcasses on the deboning lines—at a poultry processing plant in Alabama.² Jorge explains that he, along with three other workers, were each expected to “hang 64 dead chickens per minute, which is an unfair speed and an abusive practice.” Because of the fast line speeds, Jorge recalls, “many times I had to dislodge chickens and re-hang them when they would get stuck on conveyer belts and pile up on the tables.” Without additional workers added, Jorge feels that efforts to increase the speed of the lines will only make the situation worse and increase the likelihood of more injuries and deaths.

Ironically, underreporting due to fear of retaliation makes it more difficult for the federal government to design and implement regulatory standards to protect poultry workers. A lack of rigorous injury and illness data has stymied attempts by DOL to design ergonomic standards for poultry workers. Instead, in 2004, DOL issued [guidance to the poultry processing industry on ergonomics protections](#). Individual companies and plants can abide by this guidance on a voluntary basis. The federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) only has jurisdiction to enforce standards regarding personal protective equipment and protections from other environmental hazards. In March 2012, for instance, [OSHA cited a poultry processor](#) in Gainesville, Georgia for safety violations and proposed \$187,100 in penalties.

Proposed Food Safety Rule Would Hurt Poultry Workers

A new [proposed regulation](#) from the USDA would allow poultry processing plants to increase their line speeds from 140 birds per minute to 175 birds per minute, putting poultry workers at even greater risk of injury on the job. The proposed regulation, issued by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, would change the inspection process that is required to identify and dispose of contaminated carcasses by automating some aspects of the inspection process and freeing up inspectors from the processing line to identify problems earlier in the process.

USDA's proposed rule is based on the unsubstantiated assumption that faster line speed will have no adverse impact on worker health and safety. The fact that USDA fails to account for the costs to worker health and safety in its justification of the proposed rule violates the [requirements](#) to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the costs and benefits of new regulations. In addition, USDA failed to consult with OSHA or the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) before issuing this proposed rule, circumventing USDA's obligation to communicate with other agencies in the rulemaking process.

Given the large body of evidence that working conditions in the poultry processing industry are already hurting workers, USDA should not go forward with its proposed poultry slaughter rule. USDA should work together with OSHA and NIOSH to develop a comprehensive plan to mitigate hazards and protect poultry workers. Rigorous oversight and monitoring of worker health and safety should be central to efforts to modernize the industry.

In the coming weeks, NCLR will educate our advocacy network about USDA's proposed rule and solicit comments for the record. NCLR will also submit formal comments to the Federal Register opposing the rule and offering alternatives for USDA. For more information, please contact Catherine Singley, Senior Policy Analyst at NCLR, at csingley@nclr.org.

¹ Kenneth Rosenman et al., "How Much Work-Related Injury and Illness is Missed by the Current National Surveillance System?" *American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 48 (2006); J. P. Leigh, J. P. Marcin, and T. R. Miller, "An estimate of the U.S. government's undercount of nonfatal occupational injuries," *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 46 (2004); Lenore S. Azaroff, Charles Levenstein, and David H. Wegman, "Occupational Injury and Illness Surveillance."

² Jorge, conversation with the author, May 3, 2012.