

LIVES ON THE LINE

THE HUMAN COST OF CHEAP CHICKEN



Chicken is the most popular meat in the country; Americans consume 89 pounds per capita every year.¹ Yet the people who process the birds that end up on our plates remain largely invisible. Over the past 50 years, poultry has ballooned to a \$50 billion industry—while nearly a quarter of a million workers in the processing plants endure dangerous conditions and poverty-level wages every day.²

Animal processing is difficult work, and poultry poses some of the toughest challenges. Each day, millions of birds are caught, trucked to factories, hung and slaughtered, processed into pieces, and packaged. Every poultry worker on the line touches thousands of birds during a single day.

OXFAM AMERICA CALLS ON THE TOP COMPANIES TO CHANGE

The top four chicken companies—Tyson Foods, Pilgrim's, Perdue, and Sanderson Farms—control roughly 60 percent of the market. These companies produce hundreds of different products and market under at least 30 different brand names.⁴ They can and should implement changes that will improve conditions for poultry workers across the country.

These companies should change the way the industry treats workers, by:

- compensating workers fairly;
- providing a healthy and safe environment in plants, and caring for workers properly when they're injured; and
- allowing workers to have a greater voice in the workplace, ensuring they understand their rights, and providing an atmosphere of tolerance to act on those rights.

As the industry pushes for maximum productivity, it also pushes workers on the line to maximum speed. The upper limit on line speed has increased from 70 birds per minute in 1979, to 91 in 1999, to 140 today.³ Still, the industry continues to seek even faster line speeds—despite well-documented and wide-ranging dangers to the workforce.

What happens behind the walls of the plants is grim at best: workers stand at cold processing lines for hours on end, making the same motions tens of thousands of times a day. They suffer high rates of illnesses and injuries that rob them of strength and dexterity; they earn low pay; and they have little or no job security.

These are tough jobs. But the industry does little to make it easier for these workers to endure. In fact, it does not do enough to protect workers, compensate them fairly, or take care of them once they're injured or disabled. Rather, it simply replaces them with people likely to encounter the same fate.

In the effort to find workers willing to do these jobs, the poultry industry turns to populations that have few other options and are especially vulnerable: minorities, immigrants, and refugees from a variety of countries, even prisoners. Most are afraid to expose and protest the reality of life inside these plants. Those who do speak out are often dismissed with little explanation.

ABOVE: Worker on the line at a poultry processing plant in Montgomery, Ala. *Earl Dotter / Oxfam America*



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America



As consumer tastes in chicken have changed, the processing work has shifted from the home to the plant. In 1980, most chicken was sold whole; by 1995, 90 percent of chicken sold in the US had been cut into pieces.¹¹ Today, Americans prefer chicken cut into parts or processed into forms such as tenders or frozen entrées.

To feed America's chicken habit, workers on the line spend hour after hour hanging, cutting, pulling, and trimming millions of birds each day.
Mary Babic / Oxfam America

BOOMING INDUSTRY PRESSURES WORKERS TO SPEED UP

The United States is the largest poultry meat producer in the world. Today's poultry industry is a modern model of technological innovation, vertical integration, and consolidation. In the past 60 years, the poultry industry has been transformed from thousands of small, scattered farms into an industrial powerhouse dominated by a handful of companies. Large, automated plants operate around the clock to process more than 32 million chickens each weekday (8.5 billion chickens in 2013, totaling 50 billion pounds).⁵

New technologies facilitated the poultry industry's rapid growth in the last half of the 20th century. Numerous automated processes replaced manual labor at various stages, including killing, defeathering, and evisceration. Nonetheless, certain tasks must still be done by hand in the plant: from hanging live chickens to cutting wings and legs to pulling breasts and trimming skin. That work is rapid, repetitive, and low paying.

The industry is highly vertically integrated; companies own almost everything—from the chickens and feed to the product distribution network. The industry is also extremely concentrated, with the top 10 companies controlling roughly 80 percent of the market. And it is hugely profitable; for example, the stock price of the largest producer, Tyson Foods, increased 82 percent in the 12 months ending in April 2014.⁶

TO KEEP UP WITH CONSUMER DEMAND, COMPANIES PRESSURE WORKERS TO GO FASTER

Consumers love chicken, regarding it as a reasonably priced source of lean protein. In the past 50 years, Americans have tripled their per capita consumption of chicken, and the trend is projected to increase over the next few years.⁷

Today, Americans prefer their chicken in pieces; processed into forms such as tenders or frozen entrées; or served at a restaurant. In most cases, the profit margin grows as the amount of processing increases; companies encourage this trend with new products and new brands.

Each additional step in the processing involves human hands: cutting, pulling, deboning, and skinning. As the demand for chicken escalates, the companies increase the stress on each worker at each point in the line. And as workers face lines that run faster and faster, they incur debilitating injuries and illnesses—which may inflict lasting disabilities.

POVERTY WAGES FOR WORKERS

Workers on the poultry processing line earn near-poverty-level wages. Many work more than 40 hours a week, averaging around \$11 per hour. Annual income for most is between \$20,000 and \$25,000, and wages have not kept pace with inflation.⁸ An average full-time poultry worker supporting two children qualifies for Head Start, SNAP (food stamps), and the National School Lunch Program.⁹

In addition, wage theft is rampant: many plants neglect to pay workers for time spent preparing for and then finishing up after work. In 2010, Pilgrim's paid over \$1 million to current and former workers at a Dallas facility for overtime and "donning and doffing." In 2011, Tyson agreed to pay \$32 million to more than 17,000 workers at 41 poultry plants in 12 states for "time spent putting on and taking off gear they were required to wear to protect themselves and the poultry."¹⁰ Despite this settlement, Tyson maintains that they pay their workers appropriately.

Workers report that they have scant benefits. Most pay a weekly fee for health insurance (\$20 to \$30), which covers only the individual, no family members. Workers say they need to ask for approval to see their own doctor (and have it paid by insurance).

In all the interviews for this and other reports, not one worker has reported earned sick time.

//We're not asking you to stop eating chicken. We're simply asking to be treated as human beings and not as animals.//

BACILIO CASTRO, former poultry worker, currently with Western North Carolina Workers' Center



Unable to use her hands for a full embrace, Karina Zorita presses her forearms against the back of a friend's daughter. In 2007—after less than a year on the line pulling bones out of cooked breasts and thighs in a poultry plant in North Carolina—Zorita told reporters from *The Charlotte Observer* that she was unable to straighten her fingers or grab a spoon or glass.¹²

Musculoskeletal disorders have become symbolic of a preventable occupational risk faced by poultry workers.
John D. Simmons / The Charlotte Observer

CONSTANT DANGERS TO HEALTH AND SAFETY

Poultry work happens in a harsh environment. The plant is cold, humid, and slippery with grease, blood, and water. The air is full of chemicals from cleaning, processing, and cooking. The line moves rapidly while workers wield sharp tools. When these hazards are not mitigated and minimized, workers are injured in a variety of ways.

Nonetheless, although poultry work is one of the most dangerous occupations in the country, much could be done to reduce the injury rate. Most workers cite the rapid line speed as the major challenge to their health and safety.

REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES

Poultry workers make thousands of cutting, pulling, and hanging motions on the line each day (a conservative estimate is 20,000 motions per worker per day, but it can be much higher).¹³ In the drive to maximize production, the companies rarely slow or stop

the processing line; workers stand in place for hours on end, unable to pause or slow down for even seconds.

Dozens of medical studies have documented that the relentless pace and the thousands of repetitions contribute to an elevated rate of painful and crippling musculoskeletal injuries in the workforce.¹⁴ Workers report that the constant repetitive motions cause pain in hands, fingers, arms, shoulders, and backs.

Workers also report swelling, numbness, and loss of grip. These injuries affect the ability to work, do household chores, and lift children; sometimes they are debilitating and long-lasting, if not permanent.

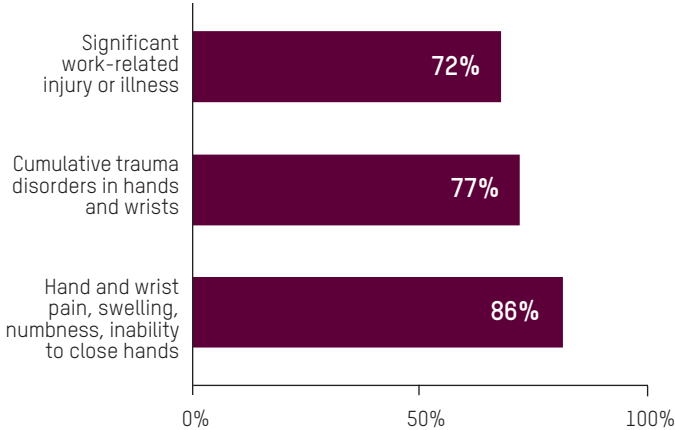
Juanita, who worked for Tyson in North Carolina, said, "You can't stand the pain in your shoulders, your hands, because of that repetitive movement. ... There are some people with hands so swollen that their gloves don't fit."*

MOST POULTRY WORKERS REPORT WORKPLACE INJURIES

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) surveyed 302 current and former poultry workers in Alabama in 2013. The results below reflect all workers, and some subsets. Refer to endnote for details.¹⁵

POULTRY WORKERS SUFFER INJURIES AND ILLNESSES AT RATES FAR HIGHER THAN OTHER WORKERS IN THE US

The source for each statistic is indicated in endnotes.



*Oxfam America conducted dozens of interviews for this project. When a person is quoted without a citation, that information came from an interview either in person or on the phone. Many of the workers interviewed requested the use of pseudonyms out of fear of retribution. Where possible, details about their plant, job, and location have been included.

OTHER MEDICAL DANGERS

Workers are also at risk of injuries when handling knives, scissors, and saws. One survey found that 17 percent of workers performing deboning, cutting, and trimming had suffered a cut serious enough to require medical attention.¹⁹

In addition, workers are at risk of skin infections from exposure to chemicals and poultry fluids; asthma and respiratory conditions from ammonia, dust, and chemicals; and mental health stress resulting in depression, and substance and alcohol abuse. Because the wet and humid conditions make the floors extremely slippery, falls are common.²⁰

DENIAL OF CARE AND COMPENSATION

When workers are injured or ill, they say they're often afraid to speak up; they worry about being disciplined or fired (or even deported if they are undocumented). The message from many supervisors is simple: working through pain is part of the job.²¹

When workers do have the courage to seek medical care within the plant, they are usually referred to a nurse or doctor who works in the interests of the company (not the workers). In the effort to avoid recording and reporting instances (to maintain a clean safety record), many plants will repeatedly offer only first aid treatments: ibuprofen, compresses, over-the-counter ointments.²²

Jose, who worked at a Pilgrim's plant in Alabama, noted, "My hands and back hurt so much that I would go to see the nurse almost every day. She would give me pills and tell me that the

pain would go away, and send me back to the line. But the pain never stopped. I would lie awake at night in so much pain."

In 2014, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) cited a Wayne Farms plant in Alabama for numerous violations, noting that "one worker was seen in the nursing station 94 times before referral to a physician."²³

Even if they receive treatment, workers are usually pressured to return to work as quickly as possible. Because plants seek to avoid "lost time," workers report returning to work after even serious injuries, such as a broken arm or lost finger.²⁴

The most common problems—musculoskeletal injuries (MSDs)—result from hours of incessant, repetitive motions on the line. However, it may be difficult for workers to prove that the injuries were sustained at work.²⁵ MSDs are largely invisible, and they develop over time (sometimes months or years).

In fact, workers often find that claims for workers' compensation for MSDs are challenged by plants and their insurers. The companies may argue that these problems are not related to work, but to another activity (in one case, driving a manual transmission car).²⁶ Workers spend months waiting for settlements that may not come. In that time, they are unable to work or to collect benefits.

Workers who are compelled to leave—because they are crippled with pain or debilitated by injuries—find themselves without compensation and without the physical ability to find other employment.

WHAT ABOUT POULTRY INDUSTRY CLAIMS THAT INJURIES HAVE DECLINED?

Despite myriad medical and community reports about injuries to poultry workers, the industry maintains that injury and illness rates have been dropping in the past 20 years. The National Chicken Council (the industry's trade association) often responds with the chart shown here, saying it demonstrates "the enormous progress the industry has made in improving safety for its workforce."²⁷

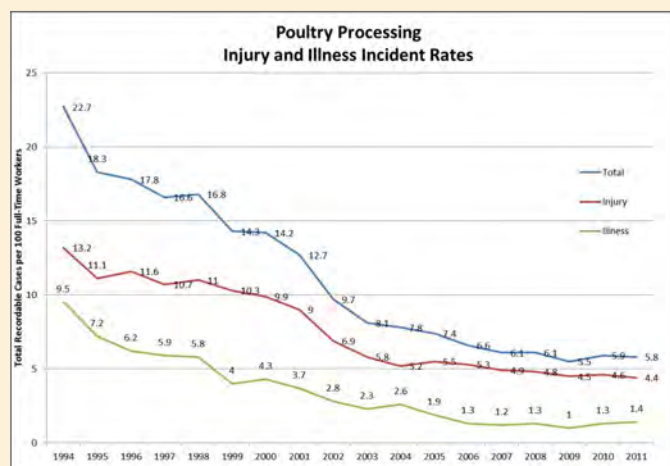
The reality is far more complicated. The dramatic drop pictured is largely due to other factors, primarily changes in the reporting system and underreporting of incidents.

In other words, workers are still getting hurt. But those injuries are not getting reported.

UNDERREPORTING OF INCIDENTS: OSHA, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), and others have found extensive evidence of many plants deliberately underreporting injuries.²⁸

In addition, OSHA and GAO have found instances of plants using tactics to discourage workers, supervisors, and medical personnel from reporting injuries. These programs may be positive (rewards) or negative (disciplinary actions).²⁹

CHANGE IN RULES: Legislative reforms in the 1990s led to declines in reports of incidents in all occupations.³⁰ Then, in 2002, a change to an OSHA injury-reporting form eliminated the column for musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs); this made it more difficult to calculate the rate of incidents.³¹



The National Chicken Council created this graph to illustrate the "decline" in incidents of injury and illness. Most of this decline can be attributed to changes in the reporting system and underreporting.

EXPLOITING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Of the roughly 250,000 poultry workers in the US, most are minorities, immigrants, or refugees, and a significant percentage is female.³² Because the turnover rate is extraordinarily high, the industry needs to find new pools of workers on a continual basis.³³ Companies increasingly turn to what one expert calls “a variety of economically desperate and socially isolated populations.”³⁴

There is a historical pattern of tapping into disenfranchised populations. In the early stages of industrialization, Southern companies relied on African-Americans. Today, they rely largely on workers from other countries.³⁵

Oxfam America interviewed workers from Latin America (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador), as well as the Marshall Islands and Laos. People reported working next to individuals from Haiti, Nepal, and China. It’s increasingly common for plants to tap refugee communities from countries such as Somalia, Iraq, Burma, and Bhutan.³⁶

The industry employs what one analyst calls “unofficially coercive” labor, including prisoners.³⁷

The largest poultry-producing states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina) feature laws that make collective bargaining difficult and discourage unions.³⁸ Workers report that plants engage in union avoidance practices, which keep unionization very low.

HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

Many analysts say that the poultry industry deliberately takes advantage of the special demographics of the workforce to create a climate of fear.³⁹ Rosa, who worked at a Tyson plant in Arkansas, said, “They want submissive employees. ... For them, a happy employee is a quiet one.” Tyson disputes this characterization.

Processing plants use complicated “points systems” that keep track of workers’ infractions (tardiness, absences, mistakes); the system is random and unclear enough that it keeps workers anxious and confused. It also enables the company to penalize and dismiss workers at any time, with no explanation; and it discourages reports of injuries or violations.

The tenuous immigration status of many of the workers can create an additional barrier to reporting instances of intimidation, harassment, and discrimination, as well as injuries they suffer on the job. Plants take advantage of workers’ lack of documentation: when they hire, they ask few questions; when they want to fire (for any reason), they can cite the lack of documentation as the problem.⁴⁰

//[The companies] keep a climate of fear where the employees believe that at any moment they can and will be fired. Then they are able to treat people as a commodity that can be done away with when they want.//

MARY GOFF, former staff attorney, Legal Aid of Arkansas



Each worker stands on the line for hours on end, performing the same motions over and over—a conservative estimate is 20,000 motions per shift. Workers are unable to pause or slow down for even a few seconds. The incidence of repetitive strain injuries is shockingly high.

Workers on the processing line earn an average of around \$11 per hour, leaving them below the poverty line even while working full time. Over the last 30 years or so, the real value of workers’ wages has declined steadily, while executive compensation has soared.

Earl Dotter / Oxfam America

Almost every worker mentions how difficult it is to get permission to go to the restroom—and the strain this puts on everyone, especially pregnant women. Pedro, who worked for Tyson in North Carolina, noted, “There’s a lot of people peeing on themselves because they wouldn’t let them use the bathroom.” Tyson disputes this claim.

Dolores, who worked at a Simmons plant in Arkansas, began wearing a sanitary napkin, but since it would fill up with urine too quickly, she resorted to diapers: “I had to wear Pampers. I and many, many others had to wear Pampers.”

Women poultry workers face particular challenges, including sexual discrimination and harassment. Most are too embarrassed or fearful to report it; many simply do not understand their rights. Rosa said, “I went to work with fear. ... Every time I started my shift and saw the supervisor, I felt like a child, so small.”

STRANDED IN COMPANY TOWNS

Poultry processing plants are generally located in rural areas, where they are the biggest (or only) employer. This situation provides even greater leverage over workers who feel compelled to stay in unsafe jobs for lack of other employment options. Pedro noted, “Dispensing of personnel is not a problem for them since they know there’s no industry in this area, and there are a hundred applications waiting to come in.”

Roberto worked as a chicken hanger in a Simmons plant in Arkansas until he was disabled with carpal tunnel syndrome in both hands. He said, “Your supervisor tells you that you have two options: you do your work well, or there’s the door.”

//It was like having no worth...we would arrive at 5 in the morning...until 11 or 12 without using the bathroom... I was ashamed to tell them that I had to change my Pampers.//

DOLORES, former poultry worker, Arkansas

IT’S TIME TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR POULTRY WORKERS

A quarter of a million people work in a profitable industry that provides the most popular meat in the country to millions of consumers. Yet they do not share in the bounty. It’s time for industry, government, and consumers to take action for vital changes.

Each has a role to play in this effort. The industry has the obligation to make changes that could greatly improve conditions. The government has the responsibility to enact and enforce greater oversight. And consumers have the power to speak out and push for changes.

Oxfam America and a broad coalition of organizations are calling on the top companies to lead the way. Tyson Foods, Pilgrim’s, Perdue, and Sanderson Farms can and should implement changes that will improve conditions for poultry workers across the country: better compensation, a safer workplace, and a greater voice.

In addition, the federal government should pursue greater oversight of the industry and safeguard the health and welfare of the workers in the processing plants.

Oxfam America reached out to all companies named in this document to share the findings of our research and engage them in dialogue about solutions. Tyson Foods was the only company that responded. They cited a number of policies (some public and some not) that address issues raised.

This document incorporates much of that feedback. For details on their response, please refer to the full report: *Lives on the Line: The Human Cost of Cheap Chicken*, oxfamamerica.org/livesonthelinereport

A COALITION WORKING FOR CHANGE

Oxfam America has been working with a number of organizations devoted to improving conditions for poultry workers across the US.

Center for Progressive Reform

Coalition of Black Trade Unionists

Greater Minnesota Worker Center

Interfaith Worker Justice

National Council of La Raza

Nebraska Appleseed

Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center

Southern Poverty Law Center

United Food and Commercial Workers

Western North Carolina Workers’ Center

GET ENGAGED, LEARN MORE, SIGN ON

Oxfam America has created a fully immersive online experience about poultry workers in the US. Please explore and take action on this site.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

In 2013–2015, Oxfam America staff traveled to Mississippi, North Carolina, and Arkansas to conduct dozens of semistructured interviews with current and former workers, worker advocates, attorneys, medical experts, analysts, and others in the communities.

Our research benefits from work conducted by government agencies and non-profits over many years; in all, they surveyed over a thousand current and former poultry workers. In addition, our research team reviewed more than 200 works about the industry, from books to medical research.

Unfortunately, some information about the industry is not publicly available. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics combines statistics for the poultry, meat, and seafood industries' workforces, which makes it difficult to determine demographics for an individual industry.

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- 8 According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), poultry workers' average hourly earnings peaked in 1978 at \$5.89 an hour in 1982–1984 dollars. If hourly wages are now \$11 an hour, using the BLS Consumer Price Index (CPI) Inflation Calculator, that would be \$3.03–\$3.31 an hour in 1978. Thus, the \$2.86 decrease in hourly wages since 1978 in 1982–1984 dollars (using \$10 as the current wage) and the \$2.58 decrease since 1978 in 1982–1984 dollars (using \$11 as the current wage) translate into declines of 49 percent and 44 percent, respectively.
- 9 American Meat Institute, "Employment and Wages in the Meat Industry."
Head Start enrolls children whose household incomes are below 130 percent of the poverty level. For a family of three, this means an income up to \$25,728. See "§1305.4: Age of Children and Family Income Eligibility," *Head Start Performance Standards and Other Regulations* (2015), <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/hspss/1305/1305.4%20Age%20of%20children%20and%20family%20income.htm>.
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- 14 See, for example, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) report conducted by Kristin Musolin et al., *Musculoskeletal Disorders and Traumatic Injuries Among Employees at a Poultry Processing Plant*, Health Hazard Evaluation 2012–0125, April 2013.
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On the chart: The top bar of 72% refers to all workers in the poultry plant. The middle bar of 77% refers to a subset of workers who do line jobs in the plant. The bottom bar of 86% refers to a subset of workers who do the job of cutting wings.
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