

# Unsafe at These Speeds: Alabama's Poultry Industry & Its Disposable Workers

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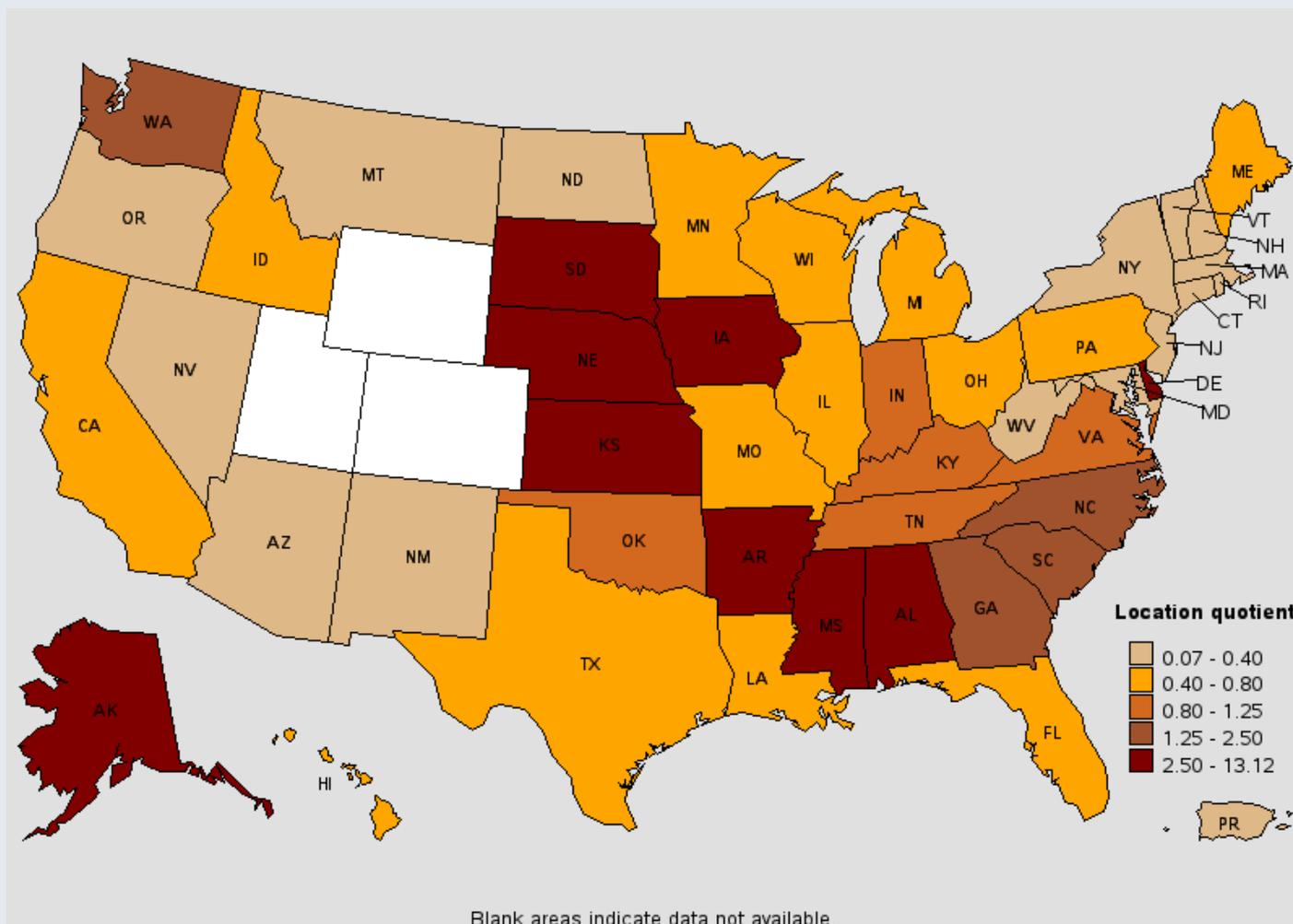
Southern Poverty Law Center &  
Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice  
**2013**



**SPLC**  
Southern Poverty  
Law Center



# Relative Employment Concentration of Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics*, Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2012, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes513022.htm> (accessed November 2013).

# UNSAFE AT THESE SPEEDS

*Alabama's Poultry Industry and its Disposable Workers*



- Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, North Carolina, and Mississippi combine to produce about 60% of all broiler chickens in the U.S.
- Alabama's largest agricultural sector, accounting for 10% of state's economy
- We conducted interviews with 302 current and former Alabama poultry workers, with interviews lasting about 45 minutes on average

# Industry Impact on Workers

- Poultry and meat workers frequently suffer work-related injury and illness.
- Employers discourage workers from seeking medical treatment and refuse to accommodate injuries or grant rest or transfers.
- Workers are often denied bathroom breaks.
- Workers face threats of deportation or firing for speaking out about workplace problems.



Photo credits: Southern Poverty Law Center, David Bundy, Edward Badham

# Study Participants' Experience in Poultry Jobs

Years of Experience	Among all 302 participants	Among the 253 participants currently employed in poultry
1 year or less	24%	37.9%
1 to 3 years	21.4%	28.1%
3 to 5 years	16%	12.7%
5 to 10 years	26.4%	17.7%
Over 10 years	12.2%	3.6%

# Background of Participants

- 54% Latina/o, 37% African-American, 9% white
- 56% male, 44% female
- 53% spoke at least some Spanish
- 64% of immigrant participants had been in U.S. for 10 years or less
- 37% had worked in 2 or more poultry plants

## True injury and illness rates much higher than publicly reported

- Underreporting is a well-known problem, especially in meat and poultry industries.
- Employers must track injuries and illnesses requiring lost-time, restriction, transfer, and medical treatment beyond first-aid.
- GAO, OSHA, and other government sources note the problem.
- Other studies have found much higher rates of injuries and illnesses than are reported by employers.
- Cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs), including carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), are very common but are most often undercounted.

Report	Source	Year	Findings
OSHA data	Companies' records	1994	22.7% injury rate in poultry plants
OSHA data	Companies' records	2012	4.9% injury rate in poultry plants
Wake Forest	Worker symptoms w/nerve conduction	2012	59.2% of poultry workers had possible or definite CTS
NIOSH Interim HHE No. 2012-0125	Worker symptoms w/nerve conduction	2013	42% of poultry workers had symptoms meeting CTS definition
Nebraska Appleseed	Worker-reported symptoms	2009	62% of meat workers had an injury during the previous year
SPLC & Alabama Appleseed	Worker-reported symptoms	2013	77% of workers in line jobs reported CTD symptoms in hands/wrists

# Reasons for Under-Count

- 66% of participants were reluctant or scared to tell employer of injuries and illnesses
- Fear of retaliation (78%)
- Futility of seeking medical treatment (no diagnosis, no cure, no rest, no accommodations)
- Points system deters workers from seeing doctors and resting
- Employer refusal to accommodate injuries or grant rest or transfers
- Limited definition of recordable injury or illness makes it easier not to count musculoskeletal disorders and cumulative trauma disorders
- Employers treat no injuries as “significant” enough to refer for diagnosis



“You’re more likely to get injured or become ill selling an RV to Cousin Eddie than you are working in a poultry processing plant. . . . And it’s as safe mowing the fairway on the 3rd hole or working the omelet station at the country club champagne brunch as it is to work in a poultry processing plant.” – National Chicken Council VP of Communications Tom Super

# Impact of Retaliation

Uncomfortable asking employer about problems	Among all workers	Among workers who had suffered or witnessed retaliation
With workplace safety	68%	86%
With safety equipment	57%	82%
With discrimination	71%	93%
With wages	60%	86%

Retaliation for reporting health or safety problems is prohibited by 29 U.S.C. § 660(c) but is rampant in low-wage worksites.



Photo credit: Inside a Poultry Plant, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XzKP8ctxrc>

## **Work speed was identified as the central hazard.**

Workers identified work speed as the crucial problem. Depending on their particular job classification and the level at which their job was staffed, workers have to perform between 15,000 to 100,000 motions per work shift.

# Speed is central, but other factors matter, too

- **Force**

- Lack of access to sharp knives, no time to sharpen them while working
- Low temperatures

- **Posture**

- Some plants offer adjustable height stools
- OSHA recommends pistol-grip knives, but they are not widely used



## **Workers can only rarely address any of these factors.**

- 68% of workers never received any training on safety policies.
- 58% of trained workers (and 75% of untrained workers) were uncomfortable asking employer to address safety hazards.
- 99% of workers said they have no influence over line speed.

# Slower work speeds would promote humane working conditions and safe food.



Photo credits (clockwise from top left): Coalition of Poultry Workers (COPW), Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest, COPW, COPW

# USDA's Proposed Changes to Inspection System

- USDA inspects chicken and turkey carcasses in order to comply with Poultry Products Inspection Act.
- USDA has proposed increasing maximum poultry line speeds from 140 birds per minute to 175, without considering increased risks to workers.
- USDA's proposal also would transfer carcass inspection duties from federal food safety inspectors to untrained employees of poultry and turkey processing plants.



# Rulemaking Petition to Address Work Speeds

- Filed with OSHA and USDA September 3, 2013 with coalition of 15 worker organizations.
- OSHA needs enforceable, clear standard for work speed in order to adequately protect workers from repetitive motion hazards. General Duty Clause has proven inadequate.
- USDA is addressed because of its role regulating evisceration line speeds to comply with Poultry Products Inspection Act.



# Rulemaking Petition to OSHA and USDA:



Photo credit: Charlotte Observer

“Current work speeds have workers conducting unimaginable numbers of repetitive motions – often including significant force, weight, bending and twisting motions – on a daily basis: Workers commonly described 15,000 to 20,000 motions per shift on the low end, up to 40,000 to 100,000 or more motions per shift on the high end. Not one worker reported having any pause time between motions or between pieces processed; in fact, laughter commonly accompanied the response to those questions. It is also worth noting that the vast majority had only two breaks during the day (usually one 10- or 15-minute paid break and one 30-minute unpaid break), and only 20% described rotating job positions during the day.”

# Questions?



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Report available at: <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/Unsafe-at-These-Speeds>