

A Comparison of Health and Safety Concerns of Hispanic and Non-Hispanic White, Union and Non-Union Warehouse Workers

Introduction

Previous analyses of surveillance data by the Florida Department of Health, Occupational Health and Safety Program (OHSP) found that the warehouse industry is among the highest risk industries for work-related morbidity and mortality in Florida (1, 2). Additional analyses of racial/ethnic health disparities found that Hispanics had higher injury rates than non-Hispanic white workers (3). A study on Hispanics in the construction industry found that those workers belonging to a union tended to have lower injury rates; it is unknown whether union membership for warehouse workers plays a similar role (4). To better understand the health and safety issues that contribute to the disparities in morbidity and mortality between Hispanic and non-Hispanic white warehouse workers, as well as union and non-union warehouse workers, the OHSP initiated a pilot project to gain the perspective of workers and key informants.

Methods

The OHSP contracted with the Research Institute for Social and Economic Policy at the Florida International University to carry out this pilot project. The project had three components: 1) interviews with key informants (i.e., government, union, and warehouse company representatives), 2) a workplace safety survey of workers, and 3) focus groups with workers (conducted in English and Spanish among union and non-union workers). The study population included key informants and Hispanic and non-Hispanic white warehouse workers in central and south Florida.

Results

Key Informant Interviews

The main safety issues identified during key informant interviews included:

- Ethnicity is not believed to play a role in higher risks of work-related injuries.
- Injury risk is related to type of work (e.g., forklift drivers perceived as prone to injury) and type of worker (e.g., hourly workers having higher risk because they do more physical work).
- Warehouse managers are focused on keeping workers' compensation claims to a minimum and, as a result, place an emphasis on worker training because they believe it plays a crucial role in workers having fewer work-related injuries and mortality.

Workplace Safety Survey

A total of 22 surveys were completed, 12 Hispanic workers and 10 non-Hispanic white workers. The number of surveys was almost equally distributed between union (n=12) and non-union (n=10) workers. All but two of the respondents were male.

Overall, very few workers reported receiving safety training. Significant differences in training (e.g., Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA] 10-hour training, first aid training) between Hispanic and non-Hispanic and union and non-union workers were not observed, with the exception of hazardous materials training. A higher proportion of union workers (83%) reporting receiving hazardous materials training than non-union workers (30%) ($p=0.03$).

Although OSHA recommends that companies have weekly safety meetings, few workers reported having weekly or even monthly safety meetings. Significant differences by ethnicity or union membership were not observed for safety issues, such as participating in weekly safety meetings. A higher proportion of union workers (100%) compared to non-union workers (10%) stated that they would report a safety violation to the employer if they were aware of it ($p<0.001$).

Employer's practices for supplying fresh drinking water on the job varied by ethnicity and union membership. A significantly higher proportion of Hispanic workers (92%) reported that "fresh drinking water was always available" compared to 30% of non-Hispanic white workers ($p=0.002$). A higher proportion of non-union workers (90%) reported that "fresh drinking water was always available" compared to non-union workers (42%) ($p=0.006$). There were no differences reported for other employer practices such as allowing workers to clean the job site throughout the day or supplying first aid kits.

In general there was consensus among workers for a series of workplace safety environment questions.

Most workers **agree or strongly agree** that:

- New employees quickly learn that they are expected to follow good safety practices (68%).
- There are no significant compromises or shortcuts taken when worker safety is at stake (55%).
- Employees and management work together to ensure the safest possible working conditions (59%).
- Employees are told when they do not follow good safety practices (77%).
- The safety of workers is a big priority with management where they work (64%).
- They feel free to report safety violations where they work (91%).
- Their job site has a good safety program (68%).
- Productivity is more important than worker safety where they work (55%).

Most workers **disagree or strongly disagree** that:

- They have too much to do to be able to follow safe work practices (59%).

Focus Groups

The main safety issues identified during focus groups included:

- Workers are pressured to get jobs done quickly so that managers can get bonuses. This differs substantially from the perspective of key informants that warehouse managers promote a culture of safety to reduce injuries and thus lower workers' compensation claims.
- Adequate safety training is not provided, especially for forklift operation. This also differs from the perspective of the key informants, who believe managers emphasize adequate safety training.
- Immigration status makes workers more vulnerable to unfair treatment from supervisors in the form of wage theft, nonpayment of overtime, or job loss.
- Work takes place in dusty, hot environments.

Conclusion

Very few differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic whites, and union and non-union workers were seen from the survey. The number of workers completing the survey was very low, resulting in a sample size too small to detect many differences that may exist. According to the key informant interviews and focus group results, being of Hispanic ethnicity is not perceived as increasing the likelihood of injury in the warehouse industry. Much more important contributors to injury risk are the type of employee (e.g., hourly/temporary) or type of occupation.

Findings from key informant interviews and focus groups were not consistent related to responses about the safety environment in the workplace. Key informants reported that warehouse managers emphasize safety training and value working safely to reduce on-the-job injuries. However, workers from focus groups reported that managers push employees to work fast, even at the cost of safety, due to incentives for high productivity. Additionally, survey data showed that only a small proportion of workers received training. Future studies are needed to quantitatively assess the findings reported from informant interviews and focus groups in this pilot study.

For more information about this pilot study or to view the full report, visit <http://www.risep-fiu.org/>

References

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