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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-96](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Because meatpacking is one of the most dangerous industries in the United States, we were asked to provide the Congress with information on the characteristics of workers in the meat and poultry industry and the conditions in which they work, the types of injuries and illnesses these workers incur, how injury and illness rates have changed over the past decade, and factors that may have affected these rates. We were also asked to determine what is known about the effectiveness of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) efforts to improve safety and health in the meat and poultry industries.

What GAO Recommends

To strengthen its efforts to improve worker safety and health in meat and poultry plants, GAO recommends that OSHA, among other things, consider adjusting its criteria for selecting plants for inspection and audits to include those that have had large reductions in their injury and illness rates over time, and changing the way it collects data on plants in order to make it easier to measure the impact of its programs.

OSHA provided GAO with written comments on a draft of this report, emphasizing its commitment to addressing the health and safety hazards facing meat and poultry workers. It generally agreed with the report's findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-96.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Bob Robertson at (202) 512-9889 or robertsonr@gao.gov.

WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH

Safety in the Meat and Poultry Industry, while Improving, Could Be Further Strengthened

What GAO Found

The largest proportions of workers in the meat and poultry industry, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), are young, male, and/or Hispanic. Although the majority of workers are citizens, an estimated 26 percent of them are foreign-born noncitizens. They work in hazardous conditions involving loud noise, sharp tools, and dangerous machinery. Many workers must stand for long periods of time wielding knives and hooks to slaughter or process meat on a production line that moves very quickly. Workers responsible for cleaning the plant must use strong chemicals and hot pressurized water.

While, according to BLS, injuries and illnesses have declined over the past decade, the meat and poultry industry still has one of the highest rates of injury and illness of any industry. The most common injuries are cuts, strains, cumulative trauma, and injuries sustained from falls, but more serious injuries, such as fractures and amputation, also occur. According to BLS, the injury and illness rate for the industry has declined from an estimated 29.5 injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time workers in 1992 to 14.7 in 2001. Injury and illness rates can be affected by many factors, such as the amount and quality of training, employee turnover rates, increased mechanization, and the speed of the production line.

Some evidence suggests that OSHA's efforts have had a positive impact on the injury and illness rates of workers in meat and poultry plants. However, while the criteria OSHA uses to select plants for inspection—which focus on plants with relatively high injury and illness rates—are reasonable, OSHA could improve its selection process by also considering trends in plants' injury and illness rates over time. In addition, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of OSHA's efforts because the agency does not assign a unique identifier to each plant, making it hard to compare the data it collects on specific plants' injury and illness rates with the information the agency collects on the results of its plant inspections and other programs.

Production Line at a Meatpacking Plant



Source: Gail A. Eisnitz/ Humane Farming Association.