

Hispanic Construction Workers and their Safety Practices

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ABSTRACT

The amount of Hispanic workers in the construction industry is very high when compared to other industries. The construction industry has become the sector with the highest amount of Hispanic construction workers, other than agriculture. Also, the incidence of occupational injuries at work for Hispanic construction workers is increasing rapidly with time; this is an indication that the safety needs of Hispanic workers require immediate attention. A survey has been conducted to collect data on general characteristics of the Hispanic construction workers, their experiences with different accidents, their understanding of OSHA regulations and their attitude towards safety, hazardous conditions at the job site and safety regulations. The results show that more than half the workers who participated in the study have seen or been involved in an accident, and most of them the accident could have been avoided, and, although the majority of them had received OSHA training they did not understand it because it was not given in Spanish. It is recommended that policy makers and all those involved in safety and health regulations address the issues of Hispanic construction workers and do further research to evaluate other factors that might be creating these trends.

Keywords: Hispanic workers, accidents, safety, training.

1. INTRODUCTION

In comparison to other industries, the construction industry has a very high rate of injuries at work. The reason being is the very nature of the work; it is work that is very labor intensive, and also very poorly regulated. Although, since the establishment of OSHA the industry is being regulated a lot more, and the amount of accidents have decreased significantly; because every building is unique and conditions are different through out the nation, the safety regulations created by OSHA still have a long way to go. Construction labor force has been experiencing an increase in the percentage of immigrants; therefore, understanding the work methodology of a "Hispanic Construction Worker" in more detail can be very useful to reach out to these Hispanic workers. The main purpose of OSHA is to minimize or prevent accidents in the jobsite; thus, if OSHA's representatives have a better understanding of these characters it would be easier for them to deliver the message of safety to these workers. Delivering the SAFETY message is the key to a safety workplace, there can be many regulations on how to do – or how not to do – a specific task, but it is ultimately up to the worker performing the task to follow these safety regulations. OSHA's primary objective should be to make workers understand that regulations are put in place to protect no one else other than themselves, and that successful safety practices are ultimately in the worker's hand.

Construction workers are for the most part immigrants. Hispanic construction workers increased from 6% of all construction workers in 1980 to 15% in 2000. This represents an increase of 300% its time in a period of 20 years (Construction Chart Book, 2002). With the dramatic increase in Hispanic population construction has become the sector of the workforce with the highest percentage of Hispanic workers outside of agriculture (BLS,2002) Because construction workers suffered the largest number of fatal occupational injuries of any industry sector, it is very important to explore the existing safety and health conditions, moreover the existing safety practices and how can these regulations improve to be able to reach out to the Hispanic labor force. The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a survey conducted among Hispanic construction workers to determine their experiences with different accidents on the jobsite and their knowledge of OSHA safety regulations.

2. METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was developed and administered to Hispanic construction workers of different jobsites. The questionnaire survey consists of 14 questions that address personal background of the worker, years of experience in the field, type of work performed, and their intention to continue working in this area, their experiences with different accidents, their understanding of OSHA regulations, and their attitude towards safety and hazardous conditions and regulations. These studies were based in the private sector of the construction industry. Data was collected from the results of the questionnaire, based on the information gathered a quantitative analysis was performed. The purpose was to determine whether Hispanic Construction workers have higher injury and illness rates than non-Hispanic construction workers, differences in safety training and use of personal protective equipment and how they follow safety regulations, by Hispanic workers who are union members versus non-union member workers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The total number of construction workers who participated in the survey where 20, all of them from Hispanic workers from private construction companies. Following the results of the survey will be presented and the data will be analyzed.

Table 1: Years Living in the US

Time in years in the U.S	1-5	6-10	11-20	+20
Number	5	2	6	7
Percentage	25%	10%	30%	35%

Table 2: Educational Background

Education	Elementary	High School	College	University
Number	12	6	1	1
Percentage	60%	30%	5%	5%

Table 3: Age upon entering the US

Age when entering the U.S	1-10	11-20	30-50	+50
Number	2	5	6	7
Percentage	10%	25%	30%	35%

Based on the results presented, table 1 indicates that over 30% of the workers have been living in the US for more than 10 years, and of this majority most of them where over 30 years old when they first came into the country (see table 3). Table 2 indicates that over 60% of the workers have some schooling and education and the highest degree of education attained was High School education which accounts for 30% and 60% of the workers only

have elementary education. It can be presumed that this is one of the reasons why these workers engage in construction work because it has lower education requirements than other industries and the pay is relatively higher.

Table 4: Previous Work Experience

Previous jobs	Agriculture	Factories	Mechanic	Others
Number	5	7	3	5
Percentage	25%	35%	15%	25%

Table 5: Type of Work Performed

Type of Work in Construction	Carpenter	General Labor	Electrician	Other
Number	3	9	3	5
Percentage out of 20	15%	45%	15%	25%

Table 4 and 5 show that 35% of the workers have previously worked in factories and that of the current work performed in the construction industry 45% of the workers are general laborers.

Table 6: Union Membership

Member of Union	Yes	No
Number	3	17
Percentage	15%	85%

Construction workers were asked if they were members of a workers union and 85% of them indicated they were not. This low union density may be attributed mostly to their immigration status, also to their lack of knowledge of the existence of such unions and the benefits they can provide.

Table 7: Accident occurrence, cause and prevention

Have had/seen an accident	Yes	No		
Number	15	5		
Percentage	75%	25%		
Think accident was avoidable	Yes	No		
Number	13	2		
Percentage	87%	13%		
Reasons for accident	Careless	Bad Luck	Personal attitude	Other
Number	2	2	1	6
Percentage	13%	13%	7%	40%

The results of table 7 are very alarming since 75% of the workers have seen or been involved in an accident, of this percentage 87% of them think the accident could have been avoided. When asked why they thought this accident occurred 40% indicated other causes followed by carelessness and bad luck which accounted for 13% each.

Table 8: Safety Training (language and understanding of same)

Have received OSHA training	Yes	No
Number	12	8
Percentage	60%	40%
Understood Training	Yes	No
Number	5	7
Percentage	42%	58%
Training received in Spanish	Yes	No
Number	0	12
Percentage	0%	12%

Table 8 indicates that 60% of the workers have received OSHA training, but there were also a high percentage of workers who did not receive this training (40%). Of the 60% of workers who did receive OSHA training 58% did not understand the training, and 100% of the workers who did receive the training did not receive it in Spanish. From the data presented it can be depicted that the high percentage of accident occurrence might be attributed not only to the carelessness of the workers but also to the fact that some of them have not received OSHA training, and of those who did receive this training did not understand it because it was not taught in Spanish. Also, there are a high percentage of workers who are not members of the union therefore they do not receive the same amount of training as those who are and may not have the same knowledge of safety procedures.

4. CONCLUSIONS

From the information presented, it is interesting to see that most of the Hispanics that work in general labor are the ones that have come to U.S. with the highest age and have been less time in the United States, this is solidifying the point made previously that construction work is very attractive to the immigrants due to the low requirements of education and the relatively higher pay than other industries. In one of the questions workers were asked the reasons why the accidents occurred, reasons such as careless, bad luck and personal attitude were given and are all linked to someone's beliefs. It is very common to see that Hispanic workers are raised with the mentality that they can do everything on their own and that MEN do not need to ask for help, also some workers might believe that wearing personal protective equipment is not always necessary or sometimes might interfere with their job. It is rather alarming to see that 87% of the accidents could have been prevented and were due to carelessness or personal attitude (which was encompassed in the category of Others). It is also very alarming to discover that 100% of the workers who received safety training did not receive it in Spanish, and that 58% of them did not understand the training. Based on the fact that the percentage of Hispanic construction workers is only growing with time, there is a call to reach out to these Hispanics workers and work to mitigate these accidents, and to consider the Hispanic mentality when addressing these issues. But not only was their mentality a contributing factor but their lack of understanding of safety practices and regulations.

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