

OSHA takes credit for one-year decline in Mexican worker deaths

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The U.S. Department of Labor is citing a one-year drop in Mexican-born worker deaths as evidence that, because of its outreach efforts, a national epidemic of on-the-job fatalities among these immigrants is no longer worsening.

The head of the department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration credited federal Spanish-language outreach efforts for that 8 percent drop in 2002, which came after yearly increases in Mexican-born worker deaths that began with the 1990s economic boom.

But the good news did not extend to the overall Hispanic immigrant population the department is trying to reach. Workers in that group - which includes Central and South Americans, as well as Mexicans - continued to die in record numbers in 2002, federal data show.

An Associated Press report last month, based on an analysis of years of federal statistics, found that the death toll for Mexican-born workers has grown to the point that one dies in the United States every day on average. Those accidental deaths are often preventable with simple safety precautions, even in the most dangerous jobs.

In the mid-1990s, Mexicans working in the United States were about 30 percent more likely to die than U.S.-born workers; in 2002, they were about 80 percent more likely. Experts agree it's a hard population to reach, and they often take the most hazardous jobs with the least safety training and equipment.

In response to AP's report, OSHA chief John Henshaw wrote in a letter to editors that while Mexican-born worker death rates "are still too high," his agency is making progress through outreach efforts. He cited increased inspections in occupations that employ many Hispanics, such as construction and landscaping, partnerships with local groups and a Spanish-language Web site.

"A departmental Hispanic Workers Task Force was created to coordinate this effort, and it is working," Henshaw wrote, citing in particular the one-year decline from 422 Mexican-born worker deaths in 2001 to 387 in 2002.

A range of experts say it's unclear why Mexican-born worker deaths declined in 2002 - the latest year of available federal data - especially since overall Hispanic immigrant worker deaths increased that year. They warned that the decline for Mexicans could prove to be an anomaly - that 2003 data, to be published in September, might show deaths among Mexican-born workers rising again.

Workplace safety experts at the federal Centers for Disease Control and the National Safety Council, a nonprofit public service organization, said no research substantiates a link between OSHA's fledgling outreach and the drop in Mexican worker deaths.

"It's not something that you throw a small amount of money at and issue some pamphlets and you're going to see dramatic changes," said David Richardson, a University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill professor of epidemiology who tracks worker deaths in the South. "It's a slow battle."

In its budget requests to Congress in recent years, the Labor Department has tried to cut what it spends on its main Hispanic outreach training grants program, most recently from \$11 million to \$4 million per year.

A Labor spokesman says the department can do more training with less money and spend the balance on other programs. However, the spokesman said OSHA cannot calculate how much money it has spent on Spanish-language outreach, or how many workers it has reached.

According to work safety specialists, statisticians and even some federal outreach workers, there's no evidence any one effort is responsible for the improvement in 2002. Possible factors include the economic recession that followed the September 2001 terror attacks and changes in immigration and border security. Mexican-born workers have stayed longer in the United States, gaining experience and perhaps decreasing their willingness to take risks.

"It's good that they're doing outreach," says Dr. Sherry Baron, a lead CDC researcher on immigrant workers. However, "a change in one year, it's hard to conclude anything. Part of it is, we need more time."

The decline in Mexican-born worker deaths came during the safest year on record for the overall work force in the United States. From 2001 to 2002, total on-the-job deaths fell from 5,915 workers to 5,524 workers - an unprecedented 6.6 percent drop.

Deaths among U.S.-born Hispanic workers declined at an even greater rate in 2002. However, deaths among all foreign-born Hispanics rose that year over 2001, from 572 to 577. It was also the first year Mexican-born worker fatalities fell since 1994-1995, when deaths dropped from 213 to 206.

Since the federal government began tracking such data in 1992, the AP found, deaths of workers as young as 15 have followed the hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants across the nation from border states such as California and Texas.

Safety experts inside and outside OSHA say the agency's outreach efforts are well intentioned, but beset by limited funding and a lack of Spanish-speaking staffers.

In an interview, Labor Secretary Elaine Chao said addressing the higher death rates for Hispanics was "a top priority."

"It is not only an issue of language, but it's developing a culture of safety, where the tolerance of certain risks is just not acceptable," she said. "Part of what we need to do is better outreach with the communities."

Even some of OSHA's own Hispanic outreach officers say they need to do more.

Marilyn Velez, OSHA's sole Spanish-speaking outreach worker in the eight-state Southeastern region, isn't sure what caused the drop from 28 to 8 Mexican-born worker deaths in Georgia in 2002. But she doesn't think workers were taking fewer risks, or that bosses were more insistent on safety.

"We knew that it was not just because it was outreach," said Velez.

More troubling, she said, is that Hispanic worker deaths appear to have risen in Georgia again in 2003.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Associated Press Writer Bill Bergstrom in Philadelphia contributed to this report.

CORRECTION:

In a story about on-the-job deaths of Mexican immigrant workers, sent in advance for use March 14, The Associated Press erroneously described Midwest fatality rates as slightly above the national average for Mexicans. They were slightly below, as shown in an AP Graphic accompanying the story.

CORRECTION-DATE: April 14, 2004