

USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism Story Behind the Story

AP Investigation

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Published by *The Associated Press*

March - April 2004

The deaths are typically short on details, buried in the metro section if they're covered at all. Jesus Soto Carbajal died in a knife accident at a Nebraska meatpacking plant. The brothers Sandoval were buried alive at 15 and 16 while building a high school in South Carolina. Jose Alatorre drowned in liquid cow manure at a California dairy, on his first wedding anniversary.

Though often overlooked, the individual stories of Mexican-born workers killed on the job can be wrenching. Taken together, their deaths offer a grisly picture.

I wondered what the bigger picture looked like. The answer was a series of stories that showed accidental workplace death rates among Mexican-born workers in the United States are a worsening national epidemic. The problem was that the federal data sources essential to the story – the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, the Current Population Survey – were all but guaranteed to lull readers to fall asleep in their Cheerios.

The answer, of course, was to focus on the individuals behind the statistics. That said, unpublished federal data were indispensable to this first-of-its-kind statistical analysis. Among the new findings:

- In several Southern and Western states, Mexican worker death rates are four times greater than the average U.S.-born worker.
- Nationally, Mexican workers are more likely than U.S.-born workers to be killed, even when doing the same risky work.
- Even compared to other immigrants, what's happening to Mexicans is exceptional in scope and scale; Mexicans are nearly twice as likely as the rest of the immigrant population to die at work.

Individual victims animated the investigation. But the package of stories, which ran on Sunday front pages nationally in March and prompted calls for reform from Democrats on Capitol Hill and an angry U.S. Department of Labor response, was unmistakably data driven.

How many Mexicans accidentally die in the American workplace and what are the trends in their death rates deaths? To answer those fundamental questions, I'd have to calculate Mexican-worker death rates from scratch.

Based on written guidance from other reporters who have covered these issues, I knew that the Bureau of Labor Statistics was the best first place to go. Federal labor officials offer prepackaged analyses of their statistics, whether through the public affairs office or the Web. But to analyze death rates among Mexican-born workers, I had to coax out unpublished data and do my own analysis.

The Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries tallies annual Mexican death totals, listing the states where they died and from what kinds of accidents. But the statistics have serious omissions. The numbers didn't list any states with fewer than five deaths in a single year – so if four Mexican workers were killed in Alabama in 2001, their deaths weren't noted. The data were short on other crucial details – names, the date and specific workplace, what happened and why. (Filling in those blanks would require travel around California, Nebraska and North Carolina. I also got a huge break when a state-level researcher showed me a federal database that details names, countries of origin, dates and employers for some accidents.)

What's more, that set of data only showed half the picture. Because the numbers didn't take into account the growing Mexican-born worker population, they didn't necessarily reflect trends in death *rates* – the standard measure used to determine trends in workplace safety. If, for example, the number of Mexican worker deaths doubled since the mid-1990s but the Mexican-born population tripled, death rates would actually be declining. An increase in deaths could mask a situation that was improving, despite a lack of federal intervention.

As BLS researchers answered my steady stream of specific data requests, I turned to the second half of the equation, the denominator of the fraction: how many Mexican-born workers were in the United States, and how had that number changed since the mid-1990s. I decided to seek these numbers by state, as well as by occupation on a national level.

I got nowhere with pleas for help from federal population researchers outside the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries. So I turned to one of the nation's leading population experts, Jeff Passel of the Washington-based Urban Institute. Passel e-mailed me Excel tables of Current Population Survey data that were right on point.

He also alerted me to limitations in these data, specifically that CPS estimates below a certain number – opinions varied from 50,000 to 75,000 people – were probably not reliable enough to use. One solution was to look at trends on the regional level. That approach led me to one of the investigation's core findings: lured by the jobs of the 1990s economic boom across the Southeast and West, Mexican workers often had higher death rates in the states where they've arrived most recently, and therefore have fewer support networks.

Other potential pitfalls had less satisfactory solutions. I wanted to compare death rates across occupations within construction and agriculture to test what I imagined would be the most common response to the story: of course Mexicans die more often, they often take the most hazardous jobs. In the end, I abandoned a comparison of agricultural laborers, mainly because estimates of those populations are notoriously squishy. I was, however, able to compare death rates among Mexican-born and U.S.-born construction laborers, an analysis which suggested Mexicans are more likely to die doing the same work. Among the explanations: less safety training and equipment, and workers less inclined to refuse risks for fear of causing trouble with the boss. I also demoted an analysis of death rates that compared Mexican workers to U.S.-born workers by race based on the advice of a BLS researcher.

Despite these constraints, the resulting database let me generate an array of death rate comparisons. Among them: Mexican-born workers versus other immigrant workers versus native-born workers by race; Mexican-born workers in specific construction occupations versus native-born construction workers; Mexican-born worker death rates in many states versus national and regional rates. Only a fraction of all this information made it into the story – but collecting it was an essential step toward writing with authority.

Although the writing relied on real-life examples, I still had to lay the data foundation for the stories. With my editors, I puzzled over various phrasings to explain death rates: "the odds that a Mexican worker will die..." "Mexicans were more likely..." Those were fine for the top paragraphs, but since we had actual rates, why not include them.

The government reports death rates as X per 100,000 workers. That seemed abstract – and because death rates tend to change slowly, it also might obscure otherwise important changes over time. Instead, I calculated death rates using the 1 in X formula. In other words, as I wrote, "The annual death rate for Mexicans increased to the point that about 1 in 16,000 workers died. Meanwhile, for the average U.S.-born worker, the rate steadily decreased to

about 1 in 28,000." The alternative would have read something like this: Mexican rates reached about 6.25 per 100,000 workers while U.S.-born rates fell to about 3.57 per 100,000 workers. What's a fraction of a worker? In my mind, the way we presented the data made them more real.

One way of relating the opposite trends among Mexican-born and U.S.-born workers was to lean on the "more likely" phrasing. It read like this: "In the mid-1990s, Mexicans were about 30 percent more likely to die than native-born workers; now they are about 80 percent more likely."

Those rates needed the context of scale. Just how many people are we talking about? Part of the solution was a lede that told readers an average of one Mexican-born worker dies "per day" – phrasing that registers more readily than 387 dead in 2002.

Tracking down the relatives and friends of deceased workers was a whole other challenge. They often seemed like ghost ships, leaving little more than disconnected phones and empty apartments as they traversed the country in search of the next job. Once I found them, though, at least I knew my carefully crafted data analysis would give more weight to their individual stories.

In sum, I'd offer the following take-away points:

- Don't rely on statistics to tell the story. Readers will tune out if you don't illustrate the story with compelling details about real people who were killed. It is hard and requires resourceful shoe-leather reporting. Finding the families and friends of victims, or coworkers who witnessed deaths, takes even longer than you'd expect. Plan accordingly and prepare for frustration. If you travel to do the interviews, reconfirm times and places (twice) before you hit the road.
- Cultivate relationships with civil servants who, though they may shudder at the thought their names ever find print, might still be eager to help. I found that for every few government workers who insist on stonewalling you, there's one who got into the work-safety field because s/he is committed to helping workers – and will help you if asked.
- Firmly and clearly explain to employers of victims that you will give them a fair shake, but that if they don't talk, you can't fully represent their side and that will be reflected in the story. With the exception of one meatpacking company, every employer I approached tried to brush me off initially – but once I explained that I didn't see these

deaths as strictly black and white (in other words, I wasn't out to skewer them), many did respond and the stories were better for it.