

“NO SAFE PLACE”

Documenting the migration status and employment conditions of workers in Alberta’s meatpacking industry during the pandemic

MIGRANT DIGNITY PROJECT – REPORT TO COMMUNITY

Author: Bronwyn Bragg, PhD

With writing and research assistance from Jose Gabriel Abes, BHSc (Hons)
& Meriam Bravante (LLM), Research & Policy Educator, ActionDignity

AUGUST 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the courage of those who participated in this research and shared with us their experiences working in meatpacking. We are deeply grateful to everyone who completed our survey and/or participated in an interview.

A dedicated team of community-based researchers were instrumental in conducting interviews, collecting survey responses and connecting with workers in the industry. Our team includes:

Adanech Sahille

Dega Jama

Jose Gabriel Abes

Meriam Bravante

Mussie Yemane

Niven Osman

Dr. Jennifer Hyndman is the Principal Investigator for this project and was instrumental in all aspects of this research.

Thanks also to Michele Millard and Dr. Daniel Hiebert

Report layout and design by Kathy Glover <https://www.kgloverdesign.com/>

Funding for this project was provided by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant (PEG) (file #1008-2020-0132).

ActionDignity is a community-based organization that facilitates the collective voice of Calgary's ethno-cultural and racialized communities towards full civic participation and integration through collaborative action. <https://actiondignity.org/>



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

THE CONDITIONS THAT MAKE MIGRANT & REFUGEE WORKERS VULNERABLE IN THE ALBERTA MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

PROVINCIAL LABOUR POLICY

- Designating meat packing as an “essential” industry
- Lack of Occupational Health and Safety oversight of industry

“I would like to highlight that the government, particularly Alberta Health Services, implemented poorly when it comes to controlling a big company like Cargill. Imagine: 900 people infected in two days. Those people have families. AHS can do a better job.”

FAILURE OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY SYSTEMS

- Internal Responsibility System
- Confusion about safety training
- Complex and hostile bureaucracies

CANADIAN IMMIGRATION POLICY

Refugees

2.5%
POPULATION OF ALBERTA

18%
WORKERS IN MEATPACKING

Temporary Foreign Workers

- Precarious legal status
- More likely to hide injury/illness
- Reluctant to voice concerns about safety

PATHS TO MEATPACKING

“I was willing to go anywhere. I just wanted to ... give a future to my only child”

IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

- Focus on employment
- Pipeline into meatpacking industry

3D JOB

- 1 DIRTY
- 2 DANGEROUS
- 3 DIFFICULT

“People will still stick around for this harsh and dangerous environment mainly to put food on the table for them and their family.”

RACISM IN THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET

Racialized workers over-represented in ‘essential’ industries

WORK CONDITIONS IN MEATPACKING

34%
INJURED AT WORK



42%
COVID-19 EXPOSURE



- Stress • Fatigue • Fear of Reprisal
- Compensation challenges • Rural & Remote Locations

Racialized Workers

21%
OF CANADIAN WORKFORCE

30%
OF WORKERS IN FOOD MANUFACTURING

“I didn’t change my work since I came to Canada. I feared from being jobless... that is why I preferred to stay in [meatpacking] and I was newcomer with a lot of commitments. I was thinking if I left this job I will only work as a housekeeper and I always used to work in decent jobs back home.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Industrial meat processing has long been recognized as a dangerous industry in which to work. These dangers became more pronounced with the onset of COVID-19: Across Canada and the United States, meat processing plants had to slow operations, and in some cases, shut down completely, to contend with massive outbreaks of the novel coronavirus among workers. The nature of this work – crowded industrial settings where workers often work side-by-side – led to massive COVID-19 outbreaks resulting in hundreds of workers becoming sick and numerous deaths.

The Province of Alberta has one of the largest meat processing sectors in Canada. According to industry reports, between 2018 and 2020, Alberta's slaughter and meat processing sector produced \$14 billion worth of goods and services, contributing \$4.9 billion dollars to the provincial GDP (Canfax Research Services, 2021). 70% of beef sold in Canada is manufactured at two plants in Southern Alberta: Cargill in High River and JBS Foods in Brooks. The meat processing industry, including these two plants, relies heavily on racialized, immigrant, migrant and refugee workers who make up a significant proportion of the workforce. An estimated 67% of workers in the Alberta meat processing industry are immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). When COVID-19 emerged as a serious threat to workers in this industry in March of 2020, it was these im/migrant and refugee workers who bore the brunt of the outbreaks, infection, and fatalities.

This report presents the findings from a community-university research partnership between researchers from the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University and the Calgary-based community organization, ActionDignity. Data for this report comes from a survey of 224 im/migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry and 17 qualitative interviews. The survey and interviews took place between January and May 2021. A team of multilingual researchers conducted first language interviews with 17 im/migrant and refugee workers who work in meat processing in Alberta. The interviews were transcribed and translated to English. The survey was available in five languages including English. The goal of this research project was to understand the conditions that produce vulnerability for im/migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry.

The key findings from this research are as follows:

- 1. COVID-19 presented an unprecedented and new risk to workers who already labour under difficult and dangerous conditions of work.** Research participants reported on the speed and scale of the outbreak at Cargill and JBS Foods and the chaos that attended these outbreaks. 42% of survey participants reported that they or someone in their household tested positive for COVID-19. 11 out of 17 interviewees also had COVID-19. Workers describe a haphazard and poorly communicated response to the initial outbreak and the need to take safety matters into their own hands, in the absence of leadership from their employers or the Provincial Government. Participants also described how efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have inadvertently worsened other conditions of work and exacerbated concerns around safety at work. The report provides a narrative account from the perspective of workers of the COVID-19 outbreaks at JBS Foods and Cargill.

- 2. Canada's temporary labour migration programs exacerbate the vulnerability facing migrant workers in meat processing.** Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) represent a relatively small percentage of workers in the Canadian meat processing industry, yet these workers experience heightened forms of vulnerability due to their temporary legal status in Canada. Our research indicates that workers who enter Canada through this migration pathway are reluctant to voice concerns about their work conditions due to fear of reprisal and/or job loss. This resonates with other research on Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program which suggests that migrant workers are more likely to hide injury or illness and less likely to speak out about dangerous work conditions due to their precarious legal status (Salami et al. 2018). While the TFWs we interviewed had previous work experience in the industry – and were recruited by their employer because of this experience – much of their initial settlement in Canada is managed by their employer and as such they are not given sufficient information about their rights in Canada, or the services available to them. This lack of information is exacerbated by geography as most live in the small and rural communities near their employer.

- 3. Refugees to Canada are over-represented in the Alberta meatpacking industry and are uniquely vulnerable to dangerous work conditions and risk of injury and illness.** Refugees make up approximately 2.5% of the population of Alberta yet represent 18% of workers in meatpacking in the province. Survey data from this project suggests that refugees are nearly twice as likely to be injured on the job compared with other categories of im/migrants. Refugee participants describe histories of moving between precarious and low paid jobs to end up in meatpacking, reflecting Canada's racialized and segmented labour market. Refugee participants describe conditions of work characterized by high levels of risk, stress, fatigue, and fear of being laid off.

- 4. Provincial occupational health and safety regimes meant to protect workers do not adequately meet the needs of im/migrant and refugee workers.** As in other provinces, Alberta's occupational health and safety (OHS) system relies on something called the "internal responsibility system." The central tenets of the system are the right to know through training and access to information on hazards, the right to participate in OHS at work, and the right to refuse dangerous work. The OHS system is complaint-driven and requires that workers assert their rights to workplace safety. This system disadvantages im/migrant workers who, as precarious workers in low-wage jobs, may be unable to assert their rights to workplace safety, lack clarity around how to exercise these rights, or fear reprisal for speaking out about unsafe work conditions. This was the case for participants of this study who describe a confusing and difficult to navigate system of disconnected bureaucracies that ultimately fail to protect workers. Most workers expressed high levels of distrust with respect to Alberta's Workers Compensation Bureau (WCB) and provincial regulatory oversight of the industry. This distrust was made worse by the failure of both the industry and the Province of Alberta to protect workers during the initial days of the COVID-19 outbreaks in March and April 2020.

- 5. While COVID-19 represents an extreme example of the risks im/migrant and refugee workers face in the meatpacking industry, workers report conditions characterized by high levels of risk, high probability of injury, difficulty navigating support and fear of reprisal and/or job loss. Unless there is significant reform to the industry and regulatory environment in which it takes place, workers will continue to be vulnerable at work.** While the focus of our project was on the impact of COVID-19 on workers in the meatpacking industry, responses to the survey and participant interviews revealed a broad array of safety concerns related to working in this industry. These include high rates of injury, work related stress, fear of abuse and reprisal, a lack of basic safety training and uncompensated overtime or sick leave. While COVID-19 posed an unprecedented and frightening new risk to workers in meatpacking, it is clear from our data that workplace safety is a persistent challenge for migrant and refugee workers in this industry.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIORITIZING WORKER SAFETY IN THE MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

1. Ensure all workers in meatpacking are prioritized for vaccination, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other COVID-19 safety measures
2. Take a holistic view of workplace safety that includes risks of COVID-19 as well as other workplace hazards
3. Apply the precautionary principle when there is an impending and serious threat to health and safety of workers (e.g. early stage COVID-19).
4. Critical health and safety information, as well as employment contracts should be provided to workers in their first language
5. Enhance access to paid sick days for workers and ensure policies around sick days are clearly communicated to workers

ENSURING EQUITY IN CANADA'S IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

6. End the industry's reliance on the Canadian Temporary Foreign Worker Program. These jobs represent a permanent need in the labour market and as such should be filled by workers with Permanent Residence in Canada.
7. Ensure federally funded settlement agencies take a holistic view of settlement and integration programming beyond the focus on employment.
8. Prioritize rights-based training for newcomer workers through community supports (such as settlement agencies)
9. Build relationships between the immigrant and refugee settlement sector, community supports, and worker advocates (including union and the Workers Resource Centre)

STRENGTHENING OCCUPATION HEALTH AND SAFETY OVERSIGHT AND ENFORCEMENT

10. Designate COVID-19 as an occupational disease
11. Reverse Provincial anti-labour legislation such as Bill 32 ("restoring balance in Alberta's workplaces act") and Bill 47 ("ensuring safety and cutting red tape act")
12. Expand and sustain wrap-around community supports that have been developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Multi-lingual Emergency Response to COVID (MERC), to support migrant and refugee workers with workplace challenges.