

Dangerous, underpaid work for the undocumented

May 15 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

Illegal immigrants don't hold the most dangerous jobs in America. That kind of work pays a decent wage for the risk to life and limb, and undocumented workers are barred from those jobs.

Yet there is plenty of hazard, risk and occupational injury for the uncouncted millions of [illegal immigrants](#) doing the "merely dangerous" work no one else wants – without a pay premium from employers who take advantage of that labor pool, a Cornell-Penn State University study reveals.

"Undocumented Mexicans receive effectively no wage premium for working in dangerous settings, whereas most other groups (including legal Mexican immigrants, and native whites, blacks and Hispanics) do," says Matthew Hall, assistant professor of policy analysis and management in Cornell's College of Human Ecology.

With Penn State's Emily Greenman, Hall published "The Occupational Cost of Being Illegal in the United States: Legal Status, Job Hazards and Compensating Differentials" this month online in the journal *International Migration Review*.

They report: "Undocumented workers are rewarded less for employment in hazardous settings, receiving low or no compensating differential for working in jobs with high fatality, [toxic materials](#) or exposure to heights ... legal status plays an important role in determining exposure to job hazard and in structuring the wage returns to risky work."

The researchers' study focused on [undocumented immigrants](#) from Mexico and Central American countries and noted that the majority of Hispanic undocumented workers in the United States today are Mexican.

The social scientists discount popular claims that undocumented workers are engaged in the very most dangerous occupations – logging or mining, to name jobs with the most fatalities according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Regulatory oversight of extremely hazardous workplaces keeps [undocumented workers](#) away from risky-but-remunerative jobs – shuffling them to the margins, where danger also lurks. Agricultural workers can be maimed in farm equipment; day-labor construction workers fall from heights every day, they report.

Data analyzed by the social scientists come from the U.S. Census' Survey of Income and Program Participation, which includes information on citizenship and visa status; the Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network; and the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries.

Hall and Greenman highlighted language barriers to safety training, writing: "Employment in the construction industry, low likelihood of receiving safety training (due both to language barriers and reduced employer incentives to train temporary workers), employers flouting safety regulations with little fear of being reported by their undocumented employees, and severe economic pressures" force the undocumented to take less desirable jobs.

Risky business

From the Cornell-Penn State study, a couple things to consider before answering that help wanted ad:

"Occupations with the highest levels of exposure to toxic materials

include mine shuttle car operators, tool and die makers, mining machine operators and metal pourer and casters."

"As expected, jobs with the highest exposure to disease and radiation are strongly represented in the health care industry (e.g., dental hygienists, radiologic technologists, nurses) but also among transportation security screeners and cleaners, janitors and dry-cleaning workers."

More information: Hall, M. and Greenman, E. (2014), "The Occupational Cost of Being Illegal in the United States: Legal Status, Job Hazards, and Compensating Differentials." *International Migration Review*. doi: 10.1111/imre.12090

Provided by Cornell University

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