



## FACTS ABOUT NORTH CAROLINA'S

# Poultry Processing Workers

**"Is it worth my health, losing a limb, losing my arms for some little bit of money—and not be able to hug and carry my child or my grandkids?" —Pedro, a former poultry worker in Western NC<sup>1</sup>**

Poultry is North Carolina's top agricultural commodity; nationally, the state is #3 in poultry production.<sup>2</sup> In 2013, nearly 800 million broilers (meat chickens) were raised, slaughtered and processed in the state, generating over \$2.8 billion.<sup>3</sup> But a closer look inside this profitable industry reveals hazardous work conditions and low wages for its workers, with few workplace protections and a climate of discrimination and fear.

## LIVING IN POVERTY

The price of chicken increases every year while the wages of poultry workers remain consistently meager.<sup>3</sup> Earning an entry level wage of \$8.50 per hour with minimal training and dim prospects for an increase in pay, poultry workers struggle to make income that often fails to meet the federal poverty level.<sup>4</sup> Many poultry workers report that what they earn is not worth the risks that the job requires them to take.<sup>1</sup>

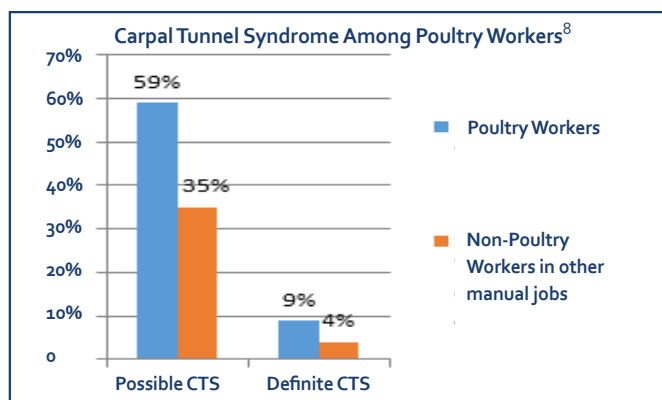
## HEALTH AND SAFETY

The poultry industry has one of the highest rates of illness and injury of any industry in the US.<sup>5</sup>

- The current maximum line speed allowed by the US Dept. of Agriculture is 140 birds per minute. At that rate, one worker is expected to process an average of 2,000 birds per hour.
- Line workers wield knives, scissors, and saws in close quarters, leading to lacerations and amputations.
- Workers are on their feet for long periods of time without bathroom breaks or a chance to change tasks.
- Workers report not receiving the skills or training necessary for the job.

The physical demands of quick, repetitive motions over long periods of time—hanging birds on overhead hooks, cutting carcasses, trimming and deboning meat—often lead to painful and irreversible musculoskeletal or nerve damage. Workers repeat an average of 20,000 of the same repetitive motion per day.<sup>1</sup>

According to a recent study, prevalence of physician-diagnosed musculoskeletal disorders in poultry workers was 17% for low back pain, 15% for rotator cuff syndrome, and 6% for epicondylitis, a painful elbow condition.<sup>6</sup> Yet the prevalence of these disorders varied by employer for rotator cuff syndrome (7% to 27%) and low back pain (8% to 28%), indicating that the health and safety conditions vary dramatically from plant to plant.<sup>7</sup>





## About the Farmworker Advocacy Network (FAN)

FAN is a statewide network of organizations working to improve living and working conditions of field and poultry workers in North Carolina. To learn more, visit: [www.ncfan.org](http://www.ncfan.org)

### MINIMAL OVERSIGHT, WIDESPREAD FEAR

Most NC poultry workers are people of color or immigrants, and a significant number of these workers are women. Many poultry plants leverage the fears of workers to create a compliant workforce afraid of speaking out.

Despite the dangerous tasks involved in the poultry industry, more than half of poultry workers surveyed in one NC study feel that “supervisors are only interested in doing the job fast and cheap.”<sup>9</sup>

In Western NC, fewer than half of those with the jobs of cutting or who rotated among several jobs (evisceration, cutting, trimming, deboning) were provided with all of the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), whereas 10% of workers involved in trimming were provided with all the appropriate PPE, and less than 10% of workers involved in deboning and packing were provided with all of the appropriate PPE.<sup>10</sup>

Reports on the industry by *The Charlotte Observer*, Southern Poverty Law Center and Oxfam America have all found that companies see health and safety fines as a cost of doing business. A 2008 *Charlotte Observer* investigative report found that fines for serious safety violations at NC poultry plants are usually cut by more than half to an average of \$1,100: “Tyson Foods, a multi-billion dollar company, makes that much profit every 3 minutes.”<sup>11</sup>

“The \$7.25 that you started with wasn’t enough for everything you needed....Almost eight years in the company, and now...I’m left with a shoulder injury related to what I used to do.”

— Isabella, a former poultry worker in Western NC<sup>1</sup>



## FARMWORKER ADVOCACY NETWORK

Reform for North Carolina's Farmworkers

[WWW.NCFAN.ORG](http://WWW.NCFAN.ORG)

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Poultry plant employers should create a culture of safety at each plant, which includes appropriate training and PPE for workers, employee-led health and safety committees, and policies of non-retaliation against workers who make formal complaints.
- Legislators, administrative agencies and companies should establish a safe line speed and include rest breaks, so that workers can do their jobs at a speed that minimizes injuries.
- Companies should provide workers with access to bathroom breaks when needed by increasing the number of “floaters” who can substitute for workers on the line.
- NC OSHA should adopt a “Special Emphasis Program” to increase the number of inspections in NC poultry plants.
- Workers need to be paid a living wage with benefits, including paid sick leave, so that they can recuperate from injuries and illness.

1-“Lives on the Line,” Oxfam America, 2015; 2-US Dept of Ag-Natl Ag Stats Service, 2015; 3-NC Dept of Ag and Consumer Services, 2013; 4-US Bureau of Labor Stats, 2014; 5-US Gov Acct Off Report No. GAO-05-96, 2005; 6-Rosenbaum DA et al. *Am J Ind Med* 2013;56(2):226-34; 7-Rosenbaum DA et al. *J Agromed* 2014;19(4):384-94; 8-Cartwright MS et al. *J Occup Environ Med* 2012;54(2):198-201; 9-Quandt SA et al. *Am J Ind Med* 2006;49:343-351; 10-Arcury TA et al. *Intl J Occ and Environ Health* 2012;18:320-328; 11-Alexander A et al. “The Cruellest Cuts,” *The Charlotte Observer*, 2008.

Full citations available at [harvestofdignity.org](http://harvestofdignity.org)

Photos courtesy of Student Action with Farmworkers and *The Charlotte Observer*.