

## **Study: Immigrant workers endure hazardous conditions, abuse post-Katrina**

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**NEW ORLEANS (AP)** — They are the backbone of post-Hurricane Katrina reconstruction: Workers who converge at dawn and wait to be picked up for 14-hour shifts of hauling debris, ripping out drywall and nailing walls.

But because many are in the country illegally, immigrant workers rebuilding New Orleans are especially vulnerable to exploitation, according to a study released Tuesday by professors at Tulane University and the University of California at Berkeley.

The illegal immigrants often work in hazardous conditions without protective gear and earn far less than their legal counterparts, the study said. Nearly one-third of the illegal immigrants interviewed by researchers reported working with harmful substances and in dangerous conditions, while 19% said they were not given any protective equipment.

Illegal immigrants also were paid significantly less — if at all — earning on average \$10 per hour, compared with \$16.50 for documented workers, the study said.

"What is fundamentally unfair is these are workers who have responded to a national priority to rebuild this city and yet whose rights are being violated," said Laurel Fletcher, director of Berkeley's International Human Rights Law Clinic and one of the study's co-authors.

Under federal labor law, illegal immigrants are afforded the same health and safety protections as documented workers. Regardless of their legal status, laborers can sue most employers under the Fair Labor Standards Act for violation of the minimum wage law and overtime regulations, the researchers said.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration said it has conducted more than 7,000 on-site inspections in the New Orleans area. The U.S. Department of Labor said it was concerned about wage and safety violations and had hurried to establish a Gulf Coast office.

"I'm not surprised that there are wage violations in the whole Gulf Coast rebuilding area — all of the conditions are there for that to occur," said Victoria Lipnic, assistant secretary of labor for employment standards. "But we've tried to be very proactive in our enforcement effort."

Before last year's hurricane, Louisiana had one of the smallest Hispanic populations in the country — 2.5% of residents compared with 12.5% nationally.

Census data indicates nearly 100,000 Hispanics moved to the Gulf Coast region after Katrina, lured by promises of high wages and plentiful work. It is unclear how many have come to New Orleans, though the study estimates one-quarter of the construction workers in the city are illegal immigrants.

While 83% of documented workers interviewed by the researchers said had access to medicine when needed, only 38% of illegal immigrants did. Around one-third of illegal immigrants said they understood the hazards of removing asbestos or mold, compared with more than 65% of documented laborers. Thirty-three percent of legal workers received medical attention when needed for a reported problem, compared to 10% of undocumented workers.

Some of those waiting for work said they are afraid of complaining.

"It's too dangerous for my body," said 29-year-old Saul Linan, an illegal immigrant from Mexico. "But I don't say anything. If I do, the boss says, 'Hey, if you don't work hard, I'll take you to immigration.'"

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