

# ESSENTIAL *Meat Processing* WORKERS

BRIEFING BOOK



## **BUSINESS UNUSUAL**

ADDRESSING ESSENTIAL WORKERS' NEEDS  
DURING & AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

a Collaboration Between  
the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics &  
the University of Colorado Boulder MENV

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# ESSENTIAL

# Meat Processing WORKERS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*"I need the work"* is a common refrain among workers throughout the meatpacking sector even as COVID-19 spreads through processing plants at alarming rates. Faced with losing their jobs if they call out sick, workers have continued to report for duty despite being aware they are walking into hotbeds of transmission, or maybe being a source of transmission themselves. COVID-19 has led to the intermittent shuttering or slowing of production at meatpacking plants, leaving meatpacking and processing workers uncertain how they will support themselves without their wages.

This is a particularly ironic situation because these workers are seen as essential -- responsible for processing animals into the cuts of meat consumers and foodservice businesses purchase to cook and eat. In the US, these workers primarily process beef, pork, and chicken at approximately 50 industrial processing plants in rural areas across the country. But their strenuous jobs are within a dangerous sector where they work at breakneck speeds and within close quarters. As such, they face extensive risks from both their workplace and off-the-job that have been accentuated by the appearance of COVID-19. These risks call for a series of measures to help reduce their vulnerability and also insure the ability of this food sector to meet public demand.

The briefing book related to meatpacking and processing workers provides the following information:

### ***Work & Risks in the Meatpacking Sector***

Workers face a series of risks in this sector that are related to the efficiency goals of the processing plants. Furthermore, these workers, who may not be proficient in English, face difficulties in effectively communicating with processing management about the extent of risks they encounter in the workplace. The high efficiency orientation, and the lack of effective communication, combine to make these workers particularly vulnerable to risks.

### ***Routine Risks Specific to Meat Processing Workers***

The risks workers face stretch from on-the-job aspects to beyond the job. In many respects, whether at work or not, these workers encounter a lack of a safety net that has become even more apparent with the arrival of COVID-19.

# Essential Meatpacking and Processing Workers

## ***COVID-Related Risks Regarding Meat Processing Workers***

Processing plants have too often put in place inadequate and/or incomplete safety measures to account for COVID-19. This, in conjunction with the lack of a safety net for these workers, has put them at a high-risk for COVID-19 infection and related behavioral/mental health concerns.

## ***Practical Impacts of Meat Processing Worker Vulnerability***

The integrity of the United States' food distribution system has come into question due to the stressors brought about by COVID-19. Analysts see the future disruptions ranging from occasional interruptions in the meat supply to outright shortages.

## ***Broader Reasons to Address the Risks to Essential Meat Processing Workers***

Beyond the pragmatic and health reasons for addressing the risks these workers face, there is also the need to treat these workers with a high priority placed on safety, security, well-being, social integration, and dignity.

## ***Key Facts about Meat Processing Workers***

What we know about these workers, with important data about what they bring to the workplace.

## ***Ways to Protect Meat Processing Workers and the Food Supply***

Ten steps can be taken to insure that, systemwide across the United States, these workers and our food supply are both better protected.

### ESSENTIAL MEAT PROCESSING WORKERS BRIEFING BOOK

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<https://bioethics.jhu.edu/essential>

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# ESSENTIAL MEAT PROCESSING WORKERS

## Briefing Book

*Augustin Rodriguez needed to work, so he continued to report for shifts at the Smithfield plant in Sioux Falls South Dakota even after he began experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. When Augustin died after two weeks on a ventilator he became the first fatality connected with the now massive COVID outbreak at the plant in Sioux Falls.<sup>1</sup>*

“I need the work” is a common refrain among workers throughout the meatpacking sector even as COVID spreads through processing plants at alarming rates. Faced with losing their jobs if they call out sick, workers have continued to report for duty despite being aware they are walking into hotbeds of transmission, or may be a source of transmission themselves. Now that plants all over the country are shuttered or slowing production, many workers are grateful for a reduced risk of infection, but face uncertainty concerning how they will support themselves and their families without the same income.

### **Work & Risks in the Meatpacking Sector**

Meat processing workers are responsible for processing animals into the cuts of meat consumers and foodservice businesses purchase to cook and eat. In the US, these workers primarily process beef, pork and chicken at approximately 50 industrial processing plants in rural areas across the country.<sup>2</sup> These 50 plants handle the majority of the 25 million farm animals slaughtered and processed in the United States each day, creating a narrow bottleneck in the meat supply chain. The nation’s meat supply is almost entirely in the hands of these facilities and their essential workers.

Meatpacking is a fundamentally strenuous, dangerous sector where processing work occurs at breakneck speeds and within close quarters.<sup>3</sup> Meat processing workers can be organized into three broad categories:<sup>4</sup>

- A. **Slaughter** inclusive of pre-slaughter handling, stunning, slaughter, federal inspection, removing hides, feathers, and/or hair and cleaning;
- B. **Breakdown**, which involves splitting, de-boning, and sometimes initial cooling; and

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<sup>1</sup>“Coronavirus: Smithfield Foods Sioux Falls worker dies from ....” 15 Apr. 2020, <https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/crime/2020/04/15/smithfield-foods-sioux-falls-sd-worker-dies-coronavirus-hot-spot/2994502001/>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

<sup>2</sup>“The Food Chain’s Weakest Link: Slaughterhouses - The New ....” 18 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/business/coronavirus-meat-slaughterhouses.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>3</sup>“Workers’ Rights Under Threat in US Meat and Poultry Plants ....” 4 Sep. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/04/when-were-dead-and-buried-our-bones-will-keep-hurting/workers-rights-under-threat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Personal Interview, Industry Source: Fayetteville, AR. 15 Apr. 2020.

- C. **Final Processing**, during which meat and poultry is carved into final cuts, packaged, labeled, and transferred from processing to storage.

In addition to the types of work listed above, USDA inspectors are positioned along these speeding lines during the day, while “third-shift cleaners” race to wash down and sanitize lines of cutting and grinding equipment in the few hours plants shut down each night.<sup>5,6</sup>

All of these workers face a number of physical and mental risks at work. Such risks are exacerbated by the current COVID pandemic and pre-existing vulnerabilities of these workers, especially as they relate to lack of healthcare, low-income socioeconomic status, living conditions and social marginalization. Further, meat processing workers and third-shift cleaners are largely immigrants (both documented and undocumented) and refugees and many do not speak English,<sup>7,8</sup> creating barriers to navigating (or accessing) federal benefit systems and following COVID guidance.

To ensure food security in the face of COVID-19, we must safeguard the well-being of meat processing workers. The most important mitigating measures within plants include slowing of production lines, increasing space and placing barriers between workstations, providing PPE to workers, conducting temperature checks to enter plants, and providing robust paid time off. Workers’ well-being off the plant floor must be considered as well. Mainly, workers need hazard pay, adequate paid time off for COVID-related reasons, including for precautionary self-quarantine. Some may also need assistance in locating places to safely isolate when they are not at work. Critically, testing rates in plants *and* the surrounding communities must increase, barriers to accessing testing must decrease, and communication of important health information in languages spoken by employees must become the norm. To safeguard the security and resilience of the food system in the United States and beyond for the long term, we must preemptively address the wide range of vulnerabilities among essential meat processing workers.

Many essential workers were taken for granted long before COVID-19 forced a nationwide admission of their value. Now that it has become impossible to ignore or underplay their contributions, we should protect, dignify, and provide post-COVID support to them. Immediate measures might include:

- provision of PPE and other protections in the workplace;
- participation in decision-making about workplace safety;

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<sup>5</sup> "USDA leaves meat inspectors hunting for safety gear - Politico." 23 Apr. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/22/usda-meat-inspectors-safety-gear-201717>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>6</sup> "America's Worst Graveyard Shift Is Grinding Up Workers ...." 29 Dec. 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-29/america-s-worst-graveyard-shift-is-grinding-up-workers>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>7</sup> "The Food Chain's Weakest Link: Slaughterhouses - The New ...." 18 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/business/coronavirus-meat-slaughterhouses.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>8</sup> "Smithfield Foods Is Blaming - BuzzFeed News." 20 Apr. 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

- paid sick leave;
- hazard pay;
- free access to telemedicine, including emotional and mental health support services; a
- opportunities to be temporarily relieved from duty by replacement workers.

Additionally, if a “Heroes Fund” to provide disability and death benefits takes shape, hidden essential workers should be explicitly included. The COVID-19 pandemic, terrible as it is, presents an opportunity to set some things right through improving the wages and benefits of hidden essential workers, resisting their social marginalization, and celebrating their contributions to society.

### ***Routine Risks Specific to Meat Processing Workers***

#### *On the Job*

Meatpacking is a strenuous, dangerous job and meat processing workers face a number of risks at work. Physical issues are common in meatpacking, especially musculoskeletal injuries derived from rapid repetitive cutting motions.<sup>9</sup> The speed of lines also regularly leads to amputations, fractured fingers, second-degree burns, severe cuts, head injuries, and sometimes death due to the pace at which workers must work.<sup>10 11</sup> In addition, high noise levels, slippery floors, and exposure to biological and chemical hazards put workers at risk.<sup>12</sup> Stress and mental health difficulties are also associated with the work of slaughtering and routinely dismembering animals; these workers experience high rates of burnout.<sup>13</sup> Women working in meatpacking regularly experience sexual harassment and assault from supervisors and co-workers, but plants hesitate to respond because supervisors are in short supply.<sup>14</sup> Finally, these problems can be compounded depending on the workplace culture at a given plant or immigration status of the worker.

Despite the identified risks associated with meatpacking work, government fines for deaths and injuries are “embarrassingly low” according to a former OSHA official, with average fines ranging from \$10,000–20,000 for companies with multi-million dollar valuations.<sup>15</sup> Further, the Trump administration deregulated meatpacking, allowing line speeds to increase and inspection of animals by outside

<sup>9</sup> “Safety and Health Topics | Meat Packing Industry ... - OSHA.” <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “Two amputations a week: the cost of working in a US meat plant.” 5 Jul. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jul/05/amputations-serious-injuries-us-meat-industry-plant>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>11</sup> “Dangerous Jobs, Cheap Meat | Harvest Public Media.” <https://www.harvestpublicmedia.org/topic/dangerous-jobs-cheap-meat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>12</sup> “Safety and Health Topics | Meat Packing Industry ... - OSHA.” <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “Slaughtering for a living: A hermeneutic ... - NCBI.” 20 Apr. 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4841092/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>14</sup> “Women in Meatpacking Say #MeToo - In These Times.” 10 Oct. 2019, [https://inthesetimes.com/features/women\\_meatpacking\\_industry\\_workplace\\_sexual\\_harassment\\_investigation.html](https://inthesetimes.com/features/women_meatpacking_industry_workplace_sexual_harassment_investigation.html). Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Dangerous Jobs, Cheap Meat | Harvest Public Media.” <https://www.harvestpublicmedia.org/topic/dangerous-jobs-cheap-meat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

inspectors to decrease.<sup>16</sup> (Worker stress, burnout and sexual harassment cases are not comprehensively tracked or addressed and are harder to quantify.<sup>17</sup>)

USDA FSIS inspectors who must be present in plants when meatpacking is happening face some of the same risks as processing workers because they work close to cutting tools, biological and chemical hazards, loud noises, and slippery floors.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, third-shift cleaners who work overnight face the daunting task of sanitizing dangerous equipment. They wade through blood, bones, and grease on plant floors. They meticulously scrub cutting and grinding machines. Although the machines are equipped with safety mechanisms for cleaning, the pace at which cleaning must be performed means that the safety measures are regularly circumvented, leading to serious injuries and death even when the plants are not operational. Most of these injuries and deaths are not captured in industry data because the cleaners work for contractors, not directly for the meatpackers.<sup>19</sup>

### *Because of the Job*

Meat processing workers are largely classified as at-will employees. Some are unionized, primarily through the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), but these unions are weaker than they have been in the past<sup>20</sup>. Benefits associated with these jobs are often nominal, and workers who do not work full-time may not be covered under their employers' health care plan or may have employer health coverage that includes high deductibles. Further, health care and even workers compensation can be difficult to access as plant clinics take weeks to make referrals to physicians.<sup>21</sup> Some of these benefits are being addressed through negotiations with unions in light of the current crisis, but COVID-driven negotiations aim at short-term public health protective measures rather than long-term improvements for labor.

USDA FSIS inspectors are federal employees, privy to the associated health and retirement benefits of federal employment, and most belong to a union. Yet, as COVID-19 has spread through plants, inspectors indicate that the USDA has failed to provide them with the expected level of protection or guidance for navigating plants with COVID-19.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Too much meat, hungry Americans: Tough choices in ... - Politico." 16 Apr. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/16/too-much-meat-hungry-americans-tough-choices-in-food-supply-188467>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Women in Meatpacking Say #MeToo - In These Times." 10 Oct. 2019, [https://inthesetimes.com/features/women\\_meatpacking\\_industry\\_workplace\\_sexual\\_harassment\\_investigation.html](https://inthesetimes.com/features/women_meatpacking_industry_workplace_sexual_harassment_investigation.html). Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>18</sup> "Safety and Health Topics | Meat Packing Industry ... - OSHA." <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>19</sup> "America's Worst Graveyard Shift Is Grinding Up Workers ...." 29 Dec. 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-29/america-s-worst-graveyard-shift-is-grinding-up-workers>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>20</sup> "Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants | HRW." 24 Jan. 2005, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/01/24/blood-sweat-and-fear/workers-rights-us-meat-and-poultry-plants>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>21</sup> "Workers' Rights Under Threat in US Meat and Poultry Plants ...." 4 Sep. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/04/when-were-dead-and-buried-our-bones-will-keep-hurting/workers-rights-under-threat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>22</sup> "Coronavirus at meatpacking plants worse than ... - USA Today." 22 Apr. 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2020/04/22/meat-packing-plants-covid-may-force-choice-worker-health-food/2995232001/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

Third-shift cleaners, by contrast, are employed as contractor workers, whose employers often accept questionable documentation as proof of employability. They do not tend to participate in unions due to their immigration status and are not offered health insurance, time off, workers compensation or any other common benefits associated with formal employment.<sup>23</sup>

For all of these workers there are concerns about retaliation related to whistleblowing, though more so for processing line workers and cleaners who may experience more severe consequences relative to their already vulnerable socio-economic status. Workers who speak to media outlets regularly request anonymity for fear of being fired, as retaliation against vocal workers is well-documented. The combination of grueling work conditions and an inability to speak out or organize to improve their working environment leads to a pervasive sense of fear among meat processing workers.<sup>24</sup>

### *Beyond the Job*

Shared spaces increase risk of exposure to COVID-19. Many meat processing workers live in dormitories or with others who are also working in high-risk essential industries, such as other food system workers or home health aides. Similarly, transportation poses another risk as workers typically commute to and from their jobs via public transportation or in cars shared by members of different families. In the aggregate, these workers have many potential contact points with the virus, within just a few degrees of separation, increasing the potential for bringing the coronavirus into the household.<sup>25</sup>

Workers' financial status also puts them at risk. Many indicate that even with paid time off (during plant closures) they are struggling to make ends meet because they rely on regular overtime work and its premium pay.<sup>26</sup>

Further, because many meat processing workers do not speak English they may have reduced access to information needed to make informed decisions and protect themselves and their families.<sup>27</sup> While some foreign-born workers develop strong social bonds in their new communities and enjoy a sense of social cohesion with co-workers and neighbors, they tend to exist apart from more mainstream American culture and to be less integrated with -- even actively excluded from -- from the wider population.

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<sup>23</sup> "America's Worst Graveyard Shift Is Grinding Up Workers ...." 29 Dec. 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-29/america-s-worst-graveyard-shift-is-grinding-up-workers>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>24</sup> "Workers' Rights Under Threat in US Meat and Poultry Plants ...." 4 Sep. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/04/when-were-dead-and-buried-our-bones-will-keep-hurting/workers-rights-under-threat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>25</sup> "Smithfield Foods Coronavirus Outbreak: Company Blames ...." 20 Apr. 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>26</sup> "South Dakota Meat Plant Is Now Country's Biggest ...." 15 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/coronavirus-south-dakota-meat-plant-refugees.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>27</sup> "Smithfield Foods Is Blaming - BuzzFeed News." 20 Apr. 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

Finally, some workers' immigration statuses may leave them ineligible for government support programs and less likely to reach out for assistance in the event of a problem for fear of deportation or imprisonment in distant camps where infections are running rampant.

### **COVID-Related Risks Regarding Meat Processing Workers**

Meatpacking work is doubly dangerous when considering exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. The primary risk workers face is exposure to the virus through coworkers. Workers and USDA inspectors are often shoulder-to-shoulder on processing lines and unable to practice social distancing.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, it is impossible to place workers farther apart than they regularly work due to the design of machinery.<sup>29</sup> In addition, a lawsuit alleges line speeds are so rapid workers are unable to cover their mouths or wipe their noses if they sneeze for fear of

missing a piece of meat, which would lead to disciplinary action.<sup>30</sup> More lawsuits in this vein are expected as working conditions in meatpacking plants are increasingly highlighted. In large processing facilities, humans are expected to fit themselves into industrial systems for optimal efficiency; the systems are not designed with human health, safety, and well-being as a priority.

Workers conducting slaughter and breakdown may have more space but face other risks. Indeed, because the work at these phases of meat processing is so physically strenuous, these workers report that they breathe heavily in close proximity to other straining workers -- creating conditions ripe for transmission of a respiratory disease.

Further, common areas such as cafeterias and break rooms may also increase risks of COVID exposure as they are often small and irregularly sanitized.<sup>31 32</sup> In one case, workers from multiple areas of a



As of May 26, 2020

**THERE HAVE BEEN AT LEAST 16,600 POSITIVE COVID-19 CASES TIED TO MEATPACKING FACILITIES...**

**IN AT LEAST 197 PLANTS ACROSS 32 STATES**

**64 MEATPACKING WORKERS ARE DEAD.**

The infographic features a stylized graphic of five hands in shades of blue and grey, positioned to the right of the top text and to the left of the middle text.

<sup>28</sup> "Too much meat, hungry Americans: Tough choices in food ...." 16 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/16/too-much-meat-hungry-americans-tough-choices-in-food-supply-188467>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>29</sup> "Covid-19 has closed major meat plants across the U.S. What ...." 17 Apr. 2020,

<https://thecounter.org/covid-19-shutters-meatpacking-plants-meat-shortages-smithfield-south-dakota/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>30</sup> "Smithfield Meat Plant Conditions Assailed as Public Nuisance ...." 24 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/business/economy/coronavirus-smithfield-meat.html>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

<sup>31</sup> "Smithfield Foods Coronavirus Outbreak: Company Blames ...." 20 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

packing plant were funneled through the same cafeteria space to receive a free lunch. While this well-intentioned gesture was meant to show appreciation to workers staying on the job during the virus, it actually put workers in a position where they could not follow social distancing guidelines.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, while many meat processing workers typically don some form of PPE, their personal equipment is designed to protect from motor injuries and exposure to biological agents from animals, not aerosolized substances from co-workers.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, workers in one plant report that they were merely given hairnets to place on their faces at the outset of the outbreak.<sup>35</sup> USDA inspectors were not offered substantially greater protection. They have been responsible for procuring their own PPE and given a one time \$50 stipend to offset the costs, assuming they can find PPE, which remains in short supply.<sup>36</sup>

These risks are amplified when one considers that many states with significant meatpacking industries did not put or do not currently have Stay-at-Home orders in place.<sup>37</sup> Many meat processing workers live in multi-generational or multi-family households or in multi-unit buildings. Thus, workers return to households where they interact with co-inhabitants who were not bound to stay home and may have come into contact with the virus. When workers return to the plant, they interact with colleagues who also had many in-person interactions outside of work. With little ability for workers to decrease their exposure at or outside of work, community spread happens rapidly in close-quartered meatpacking facilities.

The increased physical risks workers are experiencing are compounded by inevitable increases in stress and anxiety as workers walk into uncertain circumstances every day. Workers indicate that they are terrified of going to work, but feel they must continue to take hours as they are reliant on the income to survive.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, given conditions marked by pre-existing financial fragility, lack of access to healthcare, congregate housing and shared/public transportation, language barriers, immigration status, and social marginalization, many meat processing workers struggle against intersecting forms of disadvantage that put them at greater risk of contracting and suffering terrible consequences of COVID-19.

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<sup>32</sup> "UFCW and JBS Announce Increased Pay and Enhanced ...." 19 Apr. 2020,

<http://www.ufcw.org/2020/04/19/ufcw-and-jbs-announce-increased-pay-and-enhanced-protective-equipment-for-meatpacking-workers-on-frontlines-of-coronavirus-pandemic/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>33</sup> "Smithfield Foods Coronavirus Outbreak: Company Blames ...." 20 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.

<sup>34</sup> "Safety and Health Topics | Meat Packing Industry ... - OSHA." [https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/hazards\\_solutions.html](https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/hazards_solutions.html). Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>35</sup> "Smithfield Foods Is Blaming - BuzzFeed News." 20 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>36</sup> "USDA leaves meat inspectors hunting for safety gear - Politico." 23 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/22/usda-meat-inspectors-safety-gear-201717>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>37</sup> "Hot spots erupt in farm belt states where governors insist ...." 15 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/15/coronavirus-hot-spots-farm-belt-189272>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>38</sup> "Poultry Worker's Death Highlights Spread of Coronavirus in ...." 9 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/us/coronavirus-chicken-meat-processing-plants-immigrants.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

Finally, we have seen that meat processing workers are often “otherized” by plant management. Recently, for example, a Smithfield executive emphasized that workers’ “living circumstances in certain cultures are different than they are with your traditional American family,” and argued that these living arrangements -- not working conditions -- have accelerated the outbreak.<sup>39</sup> There is, of course, no way to separate the two. While congregate living arrangements may be more common in other cultures, they are also a matter of necessity for low-wage meat processing workers in the U.S., regardless of their background.

Most recently, these COVID-19 specific risks have been sanctioned by the Trump administration through use of the Defense Production Act (DPA) to declare meatpacking plants critical infrastructure, mandating plants to remain open, or re-open, throughout the pandemic. Meanwhile CDC and OSHA guidelines for meatpacking plants are still not compulsory leaving employers, not OSHA, to determine the level of protection workers will receive<sup>40</sup>.

### ***Practical Impacts of Meat Processing Worker Vulnerability***

For the first few weeks of COVID-19's spread in the United States, plants were slow to implement protective measures. Concerns about viral spread and lack of transparency from management generated multiple walkouts and many no-shows or resignations.<sup>41</sup> To combat this, some employers encouraged high attendance with bonuses and other perks, which is believed to have encouraged many employees to continue working while experiencing COVID symptoms or after having been exposed to someone with a confirmed case. While a number of processors have recently implemented protective measures for workers, this implementation was patchy and slow at best, as guidance released by the CDC and OSHA remains voluntary<sup>42</sup>.

As COVID-19 tears through processing plants -- with thousands of workers confirmed infected and, at the time of writing, at least 13 dead -- pressure from local leaders and public health agencies has forced at least 15 plants across the United States to shut down completely. Elsewhere, efforts to slow outbreaks have required reductions in line speeds and the number of workers, further decreasing

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<sup>39</sup> "Smithfield Foods Is Blaming - BuzzFeed News." 20 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>40</sup> "Protecting Workers From Coronavirus: OSHA Leaves It to ...." 22 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/business/economy/coronavirus-osh-workers.html>. Accessed 27 May. 2020.

<sup>41</sup> "Latina Workers in Chicago & Poultry Workers in Virginia Strike ...." 3 Apr. 2020,

<https://paydayreport.com/latina-workers-in-chicago-poultry-workers-in-va-strike/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>42</sup> "Meat and Poultry Processing Workers and Employers - CDC." 26 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/meat-poultry-processing-workers-employers.html>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

aggregate output.<sup>43</sup> Some processors are now producing fewer types of cuts and fewer stock-keeping units, which is expected to reduce the demand for labor.<sup>44 45</sup>

Ultimately if workers cannot perform their jobs the entire meat supply chain will be negatively impacted. Analysts and industry executives disagree about the extent of these impacts with some claiming disruptions will cause “minor inconveniences” to others predicting dramatic meat shortages.<sup>46</sup> As the crisis wears on and the meat processing capacity in the country is reduced -- for example in late April 2020 cattle, hog and sheep processing was down by 25.6%,<sup>47</sup> -- national cold storage inventories will be depleted, though this depletion is still nominal as of the USDA’s April 22nd, 2020 report<sup>48</sup>. But industry titans predict that shortages are ahead. In a full page *New York Times* advertisement, the chairman of Tyson Foods did not mince words: “[T]he food supply chain is vulnerable. As pork, beef, and chicken plants are being forced to close, even for short periods of time, millions of pounds of meat will disappear from the supply chain. As a result, there will be a limited supply of our products available in grocery stores.”<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, producers are already being forced to make difficult decisions as plants shutter and lines slow. The reduction in processing capacity has prevented farmers from moving animals to slaughter thus freeing up space for young animals that need to be moved into barn space. As a result producers face the prospect of euthanizing young animals they now lack the capacity to raise. Grimly, John Tyson has acknowledged that millions of animals will be “depopulated” or destroyed because of the closure of processing facilities -- a wasteful and disquieting outcome that no one wants.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, to avoid the need for future culling, producers must reduce the rate of reproduction of animals.<sup>51</sup> These decisions will have a longer-range impact on the US meat supply. Supply will ultimately contract due to a lack of processing capacity therein reducing the amount of meat available to consumers.

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<sup>43</sup> "Covid-19 has closed major meat plants across the U.S. What ...." 17 Apr. 2020, <https://thecounter.org/covid-19-shutters-meatpacking-plants-meat-shortages-smithfield-south-dakota/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>44</sup> "Covid-19 has closed major meat plants across the U.S. What ...." 17 Apr. 2020, <https://thecounter.org/covid-19-shutters-meatpacking-plants-meat-shortages-smithfield-south-dakota/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>45</sup> "U.S. Food Supply Chain Is Strained as Virus Spreads - The ...." 13 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/business/coronavirus-food-supply.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>46</sup> "U.S. Meat Supply Is 'Perilously Close' To A Shortage ... - NPR." 13 Apr. 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/13/833110486/u-s-meat-supply-is-perilously-close-to-a-shortage-ceo-warns>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>47</sup> "Tyson warns of 'meat shortages' as factories face ... - USA Today." 27 Apr. 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/04/27/tyson-meat-shortages-coronavirus-covid-19/3034748001/>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>48</sup> "Publication | Cold Storage | ID: pg15bd892 | USDA Economics ...." <https://usda.library.cornell.edu/concern/publications/pg15bd892>. Accessed 26 May. 2020.

<sup>49</sup> John Tyson, "A Delicate Balance: Feeding the Nation and Keeping Our Employees Healthy," *New York Times* (promotional content, print edition), 26 Apr 2020.

<sup>50</sup> John Tyson, "A Delicate Balance: Feeding the Nation and Keeping Our Employees Healthy," *New York Times* (promotional content, print edition), 26 Apr 2020.

<sup>51</sup> "U.S. Food Supply Chain Is Strained as Virus Spreads - The ...." 13 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/business/coronavirus-food-supply.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

Supply concerns extend beyond livestock and meat products to the pool of available workers. If meat processing workers are unable to work due to COVID infection, the need to preventatively isolate coupled with long-term damage from COVID, other injuries, or death, will make it difficult to replenish this labor force. Slaughtering and butchering hundreds or thousands of animals per day is not the kind of job that many Americans are clamoring to do -- it is a job that workers take when they have few other options. Additionally, Trump-era immigration policies have made it difficult for meatpackers to find enough workers in recent years.<sup>52 53</sup>

### ***Broader Reasons to Address the Risks to Essential Meat Processing Workers***

The primary prudential reasons to address risks to meat processing workers is that there are real chances of meat shortages if outbreaks in plants are not brought under control and become more widespread. These shortages threaten consumers' access to meat but also put farm producers' livelihoods at risk as millions of animals may have to be euthanized if processing plants cannot operate.

Additionally, in several counties and regions, a majority of the confirmed COVID infections can be traced back to meatpacking plants, demonstrating the public health reasons for devoting resources to safeguarding workers, minimizing spread among this population, and avoiding the collapse of rural hospitals. Instead of allowing meatpacking plants to become viral hotspots, we must actively manage these facilities, turning them into sites of best practice. There will enable greater understanding of and ability to control outbreaks in rural agricultural and manufacturing communities.

The vast majority of meat-eaters in America are only able to access the food they put at the center of their plates because of the labors and sacrifices of meat processing workers. Consumers who wish to continue consuming meat -- and, especially those who prize access to extremely affordable, widely available meat -- ought to acknowledge the workers whose diligent performance of a very difficult, risky, unglamorous job make their dietary preferences possible. The same goes for farmers who make their living by raising animals for meat, the processors who profit from the labor of their workers, and the wholesalers and retailers who are only able to satisfy the American appetite for meat because meat processing workers spend their lives on the line. But mere acknowledgement is not enough. All who benefit from a steady and cheap supply of meat should mobilize in support of workers -- now and in a desired post-COVID-19 future. Our country needs to keep their contributions -- and their plight -- visible until they enjoy the kind of safety, security, well-being, social integration and dignity that we all hope to have.

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<sup>52</sup> "Trump Administration's Refugee Limits Leave Meatpacking ...." 15 Mar. 2019, <https://www.harvestpublicmedia.org/post/trump-administration-s-refugee-limits-leave-meatpacking-plants-struggling-find-enough-workers>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>53</sup> "Workers in demand in meat processing - The Boston Globe." 17 Oct. 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2018/10/17/workers-demand-meat-processing/wGzSTyNPyyYQL0bxaBiTRP/story.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

Making meatpacking more ethical is important in and of itself. But insofar as action may require a business justification, it is worth noting that high-income consumers are increasingly demanding more ethically produced meat -- these consumers are more aware of such dimensions as animal welfare<sup>54</sup>, environmental impact<sup>55</sup>, and fair labor practices. Moreover, many exhibit a willingness to pay a premium for such products<sup>56</sup> <sup>57</sup>. Moreover, as COVID outbreaks are drawing unprecedented public attention to the meatpacking sector, the swath of the population concerned about the conditions therein may be widening. Making progress on worker well-being provides an opportunity for companies to improve their public image -- which, for some, may be in dire need of repair after COVID outbreaks at plants.

In the interests of food security, national security, and public health, once the COVID-crisis is under control there must be a careful assessment of the costs of extreme efficiency in the meat packing sector, with an eye-toward building fairness and resilience.



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<sup>54</sup> "The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare - Annual Reviews." <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-resource-100516-053419>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>55</sup> "Why the meat industry is working together on sustainability ...." 17 Jul. 2019, <https://www.fooddive.com/news/why-the-meat-industry-is-working-together-on-sustainability/558884/>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>56</sup> "Citizens, consumers and farm animal welfare - ScienceDirect ...." <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S030691921730060X>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

<sup>57</sup> "Assessing Consumer and Producer Preferences for Animal ...." <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1477-9552.12297>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

## KEY FACTS ABOUT MEAT PROCESSING WORKERS

- There are approximately 500,000 people working in meatpacking plants in the US.<sup>58</sup> This number does not include USDA inspectors or third-shift cleaners who are typically employed by companies meatpacking plants contract cleaning out to.<sup>59</sup>
- These workers are largely people of color, immigrants and refugees.<sup>60</sup> The composition of this workforce raises unique challenges when it comes to communication and effective precautionary messaging.<sup>61</sup> For example, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, workers in a single plant speak as many as 27 languages and 80 dialects.<sup>62</sup> Many of these workers (some estimate up to 1/2) are undocumented.<sup>63</sup>
- There is a relatively even distribution of men and women working in meatpacking.<sup>64</sup>
- Meat processing workers suffer from rampant repetitive motion injuries and chronic pain, as well as suffering serious permanent disabilities from equipment-involved accidents.<sup>65 66</sup>
- For this grueling work the BLS reports that average hourly wages in 2018 were \$13.68/hr,<sup>67</sup> though it is unclear if this data captures the true wages experienced by all workers, especially considering the number of undocumented workers whose wages may not be reported or are experiencing wage theft. That said, many meat processing workers indicate that they have been able to obtain a quality of life previously unavailable to them and even support family in their home countries with their wages. This is often due, in part, to the fact that plants tend to be located in areas with relatively low cost of living and workers regularly pull overtime shifts.<sup>68</sup>
- Approximately 1/3 of poultry workers and 2/3 of beef and pork workers are unionized, though third-shift cleaners rarely participate in unions.<sup>69</sup> This represents a substantial decline in organized labor in the processing sector from mid-nineteenth century levels. USDA FSIS inspectors are largely unionized.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Too much meat, hungry Americans: Tough choices in food ...." 16 Apr. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/16/too-much-meat-hungry-americans-tough-choices-in-food-supply-188467>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>59</sup> "America's Worst Graveyard Shift Is Grinding Up Workers ...." 29 Dec. 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-29/america-s-worst-graveyard-shift-is-grinding-up-workers>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "U.S. Food Supply Chain Is Strained as Virus Spreads - The ...." 13 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/business/coronavirus-food-supply.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>61</sup> "Smithfield Foods Is Blaming - BuzzFeed News." 20 Apr. 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/smithfield-foods-coronavirus-outbreak>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>62</sup> "The Food Chain's Weakest Link: Slaughterhouses - The New ...." 18 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/business/coronavirus-meat-slaughterhouses.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "US: Meatpacking Workers' Rights Under Threat | Human ...." 4 Sep. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/04/us-meatpacking-workers-rights-under-threat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>64</sup> "US: Meatpacking Workers' Rights Under Threat | Human ...." 4 Sep. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/04/us-meatpacking-workers-rights-under-threat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>65</sup> "US: Meatpacking Workers' Rights Under Threat | Human ...." 4 Sep. 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/04/us-meatpacking-workers-rights-under-threat>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>66</sup> "Safety and Health Topics | Meat Packing Industry ... - OSHA." <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>67</sup> "Slaughterers and Meat Packers - Bureau of Labor Statistics." <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes513023.htm>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>68</sup> "South Dakota Meat Plant Is Now Country's Biggest ...." 15 Apr. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/coronavirus-south-dakota-meat-plant-refugees.html>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>69</sup> "America's Worst Graveyard Shift Is Grinding Up Workers ...." 29 Dec. 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-29/america-s-worst-graveyard-shift-is-grinding-up-workers>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>70</sup> "USDA leaves meat inspectors hunting for safety gear - Politico." 23 Apr. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/22/usda-meat-inspectors-safety-gear-201717>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

# WAYS TO PROTECT MEAT PROCESSING WORKERS

To adequately protect essential meat processing workers in this time of crisis -- and, in turn, a major portion of the U.S. farm sector and food supply -- a number of actions are required.

At a minimum, government officials -- especially regulators and administrators should -- take all of the steps listed below.

1. Mandate that CDC and OSHA worker safety guidelines be implemented, rather than allowing adopting guidance to remain voluntary.
2. Provide local public health officials the authority to enforce CDC and OSHA mandates.
3. Leverage the DPA to ensure meatpacking workers are provided with adequate PPE if plants are required to remain open throughout the pandemic.

At a minimum, employers should take all of the steps listed below.

1. All processing workers and third-shift cleaners must have adequate health insurance, prompt access to workers compensation, on-site medical assistance, access to telemedicine for diagnosis and treatment of physical symptoms and mental health concerns.
2. Safety and self-protection training must be provided in appropriate languages and regularly updated to reflect evolving understanding of risks.
3. Temperature checks must be performed on anyone entering a plant.
4. Workers must be provided with PPE, such as gloves, masks, and face-shields. Other protective measures, such as barriers between workstations must be installed where workers cannot distance by at least 6 feet.
5. Cafeterias, break rooms, restrooms, and all other shared spaces off the production line must also be sanitized regularly. The number of workers present in these spaces at any one time must be sharply limited to enable maintenance of physical distance.
6. Line speeds must be slowed to allow workers to follow CDC guidelines, specifically allowing for additional time to sanitize tools and work stations.
7. Adequate breaks must be provided that allow workers time to wash their hands regularly.
8. Workers need to receive hazard pay and paid time off for all COVID related issues and Paid-time-off should be commensurate with workers' average earnings, not just their base hourly wages. If bonuses are provided for workers, they must be structured such that they do not incentivize sick workers to continue to work.
9. Unless and until COVID testing is widely available without charge, entitlement to paid sick leave must not be contingent upon a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis.
10. Notify workers about the number of positive cases in plants, enabling informed personal risk assessments.

To be fair, some of these measures have been or are being implemented -- albeit asymmetrically and only after outbreaks raged, walkouts occurred, and/or unions insisted.<sup>71 72</sup> Because outbreaks are expected to surge and recede until vaccines and effective treatments are developed, it will be critical to maintain the protective measures and supports and avoid a complacency that can lead to resurgent infections and future shutdowns.

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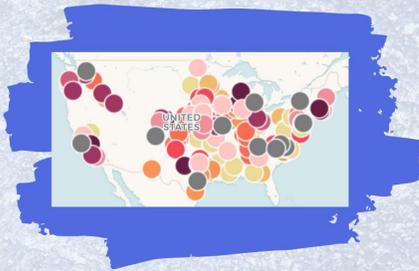
<sup>71</sup> "UFCW and JBS Announce Increased Pay and Enhanced ...." 19 Apr. 2020.

<http://www.ufcw.org/2020/04/19/ufcw-and-jbs-announce-increased-pay-and-enhanced-protective-equipment-for-meatpacking-workers-on-frontlines-of-coronavirus-pandemic/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

<sup>72</sup> "After 10 Workers Get COVID-19, 1,000 Meatpackers Walk Off ...." 1 Apr. 2020. <https://paydayreport.com/1000-immigrant-meatpackers-walk-off-the-job-in-colorado/>. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### MAP OF COVID-OUTBREAKS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

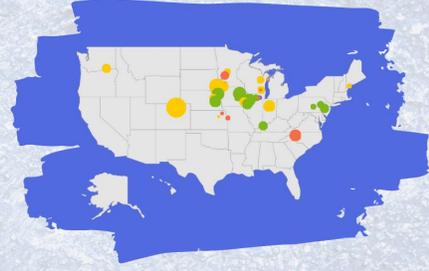


[HTTPS://THEFERN.ORG/2020/04/MAPPING-COVID-19-IN-MEAT-AND-FOOD-PROCESSING-PLANTS/](https://thefern.org/2020/04/mapping-covid-19-in-meat-and-food-processing-plants/)



**FOOD & ENVIRONMENT  
REPORTING NETWORK**

### MEAT PROCESSING PLANT CLOSURE MAP



[HTTPS://THECOUNTER.ORG/MAPPING-COVID-19-RELATED-SLAUGHTERHOUSE-CLOSURES-CORONAVIRUS](https://thecounter.org/mapping-covid-19-related-slaughterhouse-closures-coronavirus)

**The  
Counter**

### TRACKING COVID-19'S IMPACT ON MEATPACKING WORKERS

[HTTPS://INVESTIGATE  
MIDWEST.ORG/2020/0  
4/16/TRACKING-  
COVID-19S-IMPACT-  
ON-MEATPACKING-  
WORKERS-AND-  
INDUSTRY/](https://investigatemidwest.org/2020/04/16/tracking-covid-19s-impact-on-meatpacking-workers-and-industry/)

**MidWest Center**  
for INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

Cases by Company



### ESSENTIAL MEAT PROCESSING WORKERS BRIEFING BOOK

*Abigail B. Long, MS - Lead Author*  
*Nicole Civita, JD, LLM - Senior Author*  
*Burton St. John, PhD - Editor*

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ADDRESSING ESSENTIAL WORKERS' NEEDS  
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