

Improving Occupational Safety and Health Among Mexican Immigrant Workers: A Binational Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Background: Mexican immigrant workers in the United States face occupational safety and health (OSH) hazards that are often overlooked. This study was a binational collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Mexico to improve OSH among Mexican immigrant workers in the United States. Methods: A binational team of researchers from CDC and MFA conducted a binational collaboration to improve OSH among Mexican immigrant workers in the United States. Results: The binational team identified OSH hazards that are often overlooked and developed interventions to address these hazards. Conclusions: This binational collaboration was successful in identifying OSH hazards and developing interventions to address these hazards. The binational team was able to identify OSH hazards that are often overlooked and develop interventions to address these hazards. The binational team was able to identify OSH hazards that are often overlooked and develop interventions to address these hazards.

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Mexican immigration to the United States has increased dramatically during the past 40 years. In 2008, 12.7 million Mexican immigrants were living in the U.S., accounting for 32% of the foreign-born population, up from just 8% (760,000) in 1970.¹ Mexican immigrants have also started settling in nontraditional areas, such as the Midwestern and Southeastern U.S., giving the Latino population a truly national presence. This unanticipated growth and geographic expansion presents unique challenges for immigrants and society

benefits (e.g., unemployment benefits), which can discourage them from accessing worker protections and resources to which they are entitled (e.g., Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA] protections and workers' compensation in most states).^{12,19}

Lack of access to information is also a barrier for many Mexican immigrant workers.⁷ The U.S. labor law differs from Mexico's, and many immigrants may be unaware of the rights and responsibilities of employees and employers for maintaining a safe workplace. Worksite risks and the safety procedures to avoid them are often unfamiliar to these workers either because the technologies, products, or procedures in the U.S. are different from those in their home country or because immigrants often work in different industries than they did back home.²⁰ Language barriers and illiteracy can also make it difficult for workers to understand safety information and make employers less likely to spend time giving information beyond basic job task instructions.²¹

Although many of the fundamental barriers Latino immigrant workers face to achieve good OSH will ultimately need to be addressed through changes in law, policies, and/or regulatory enforcement, it is possible to greatly improve their circumstances through outreach, education, and improved access to existing resources. Essential to this process is partnering with organizations already serving the immigrant community. OSH agencies often find that the approaches and networks used to promote OSH among U.S.-born workers are ineffective for reaching Latino immigrants.²² For example, immigrant workers are overrepresented in the contingent workforce and, therefore, are often not exposed to traditional workplace-based safety trainings.²² Collaborations with organizations that have both expertise in serving Latino immigrants and the trust of these communities are needed to provide workers with the practical tools and institutional support that can help them minimize, if not overcome, barriers to OSH.⁹ In addition, partnering with community organizations can help lay the foundation for the long-term elimination of fundamental structural obstacles to health.

Improving the OSH of Mexican immigrants improves their overall health and that of their families and communities. Efforts are needed in at least four key areas: () surveillance and research to better understand the factors contributing to OSH disparities and the policies and practices that could mitigate them, () improved working conditions, () long-term changes to reduce immigrant worker vulnerability, and () improving immigrant workers' access to current workplace protections. The infrastructure and social programs of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs are well-suited to

address the first and last of these issues. The remainder of this article describes current collaborations between NIOSH and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a trusted resource for health, legal, and other information in the Mexican immigrant community.

NIOSH-MEXICO PARTNERSHIP

Increased emigration has led to significant demographic changes for Mexico. In 1970, only 1.7% of Mexican citizens lived in the U.S.; however, in 2008, 11% of the total Mexican population, and an even larger portion of the working-aged population, lived in the U.S.²³ Currently, there are 50 Mexican consulates in the U.S. providing more than four million discrete service contacts to Mexican citizens annually.²⁴ These consulates offer a variety of economic and social programs in addition to traditional consular functions. Created in 2003, the Institute for Mexicans Abroad (*Instituto Mexicano para el Bienestar de los Mexicanos en el Extranjero*) is an independent department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that works through the consulates to implement social programming aimed at empowering the Mexican diaspora.²⁵ This programming represents a significant expansion of the function that consular offices have traditionally fulfilled and offers a relatively new and unprecedented opportunity for partnerships with U.S. agencies.¹³

During the past decade, the Mexican government has begun to promote the health and well-being of its citizens working in the U.S. as part of this expanded focus on social programming. Although these programs tend to focus on communicable and chronic diseases, OSH has recently been included in events sponsored by the Mexican government such as Binational Health Week and the XII Binational Policy Forum on Migration and Global Health. The centrality of work to the Mexican immigrant experience, the significant OSH disparities, and the consulates' efforts to promote the general welfare of Mexicans living in the U.S. make the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, in particular, the Institute for Mexicans Abroad, natural partners for NIOSH's efforts to address occupational health disparities.

In 2008, NIOSH approached the Mexican government to collaborate on the development, dissemination, and evaluation of OSH information products tailored for distribution through Mexican consulates. The relationship created during the initial materials development project has allowed for expansion of the collaboration to address OSH issues in three key areas: research and surveillance, information dissemination, and improving access to resources. While most of this work is ongoing, the related projects have already yielded important results and suggest areas for further collaboration.

Research and surveillance
Underrepresentation of immigrants in traditional

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