

# In the News

## Hispanic Workers Face Higher Death Rate

According to a recent study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Hispanic workers are much more likely than non-Hispanic workers to die of injuries suffered on the job. Published as “Work-Related Injury Deaths Among Hispanics: United States, 1992–2006” in the CDC’s June 6 *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, the study examines all work-related fatal injuries, not just construction-related deaths. But the numbers clearly underscore the heightened risk faced by Hispanics in the construction industry. Among the findings are the following:

- For the entire 15-year study period, the death rate from on-the-job injuries for Hispanic workers was 5.0 deaths per 100,000, compared with 4.0 for non-Hispanic white workers and 3.7 for non-Hispanic black workers. The disparity was even greater between U.S.-born and foreign-born Hispanics: From 2003 to 2006, the death rate for foreign-born Hispanics stood at 5.9, compared with 3.5 for U.S.-born Hispanics.
- During 2003 to 2006, slightly more than two-thirds of all fatal job-related injuries to Hispanic workers involved foreign-born workers, about 70 percent of whom were born in Mexico.
- During 2003 to 2006, 34 percent of all Hispanic-worker deaths occurred in the construction industry. In all but two of the states that recorded 30 or more deaths among Hispanic workers during that three-year period, construction was the single largest source of work-related deaths.
- Fatal falls to a lower level increased by 370 percent from 1992 to 2006, with the sharpest increase occurring during the construction boom years of 2003 to 2006.
- California had the highest total number — 773 — of Hispanic work-related deaths during the 2003-to-2006 period, followed by Texas with 687 and Florida with 417. The states with the highest death rates per 100,000 Hispanic workers were Georgia with 9.6, Oklahoma with 10.3, and South Carolina with 22.8

So why the safety gap? The report doesn’t examine specific causes, but speculates that Hispanic workers may have greater “susceptibility to miscommunication caused by language differences and other potential risks associated with culture and economic status,” and that foreign-born workers “might be more willing to perform tasks with higher risk and more hesitant to decline such tasks for fear of losing their jobs.”

Hank Cierpich, an investigator with California’s Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation program, has spent nearly two decades interviewing witnesses to fatal accidents. According to him, language and culture definitely play a part in many — if not most — accidents

■ With scrap-copper prices exceeding \$3 a pound and thieves plundering job sites of wire, plumbing parts, and air conditioning units, at least 26 states have passed laws that impose stricter penalties for copper theft and tighten recordkeeping requirements for scrap yards, says the NAHB. A discussion draft of a similar federal law is currently circulating on Capitol Hill.

■ KB Home reported both good news and bad news in June. The Los Angeles-based company won eight Energy Star Leadership in Housing awards from the EPA for its “My Home. My Earth” environmental initiative. But in reporting a 55 percent drop in revenue for 2008’s second quarter, it fell short of another sort of green. The \$639.1 million second-quarter revenue figure was less than half that of the same quarter a year ago.

■ California home builders are expected to begin construction on a mere 72,000 homes, condominiums, and apartments in 2008, according to a midyear housing forecast from the California Building Industry Association. That figure is much lower than earlier forecasts; if correct, it will be the smallest number of projects undertaken by the state’s builders since at least the early 1950s. Association chair Ray Becker is calling for builder-friendly legislation, including measures to encourage cities to defer building fees to the time of occupancy and to allow builders an extra year to complete approved projects before permits expire.

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involving Hispanic workers. He notes that Hispanic crew members are famously hardworking and eager to please, and will often undertake potentially dangerous tasks without clearly understanding the risks involved. “Ask if he understands,” Cierpich says, “and the answer is always *sí*.”

As Cierpich sees it, though, the root problem has less to do with language and culture than with inadequate training by employers. “It does no good to sit these workers in front of a training video and then put them to work,” he says. “You have to take it a step further and verify that they do understand. I’ve found that most employers don’t take that second step.” — *Jon Vara*

■ Atlanta home builders, eager to unload more than 20,000 unsold new homes in the 22-county metro area, are increasingly turning to lease-to-purchase programs, the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* reports. Such plans allow buyers to lease homes for a specified time and apply part of the rent to an eventual down payment. One home builder quoted by the paper urged caution, noting that builders “must figure out a way to make sure [buyers] will close on the property when the lease is up. If you don’t have that, you’ve just gotten yourself into the apartment business.”

## San Diego Launches New Recycling Mandate

**L**ike other California municipalities, San Diego has spent nearly a decade grappling with a state mandate that requires it to channel at least 50 percent of its waste stream into recycling or reuse. And with its Miramar landfill rapidly approaching capacity — the facility could be forced to close as early as 2012 — the city recently rolled out two measures aimed at motivating builders to cut back on the estimated 400,000 tons of construction and demolition waste dumped there each year.

In April, the city hiked tipping fees for construction and demolition waste from \$46 per ton to \$92. Three months later, on July 1, a new refundable-fee program for construction and demolition waste went into effect. It requires that contractors applying for a building or demolition permit estimate how much debris the project will generate and specify how it will be disposed of; at least 50 percent must be recycled, donated, or reused. When contractors turn in the waste-management form and pick up their job permit, they pay a fee based on project size and type.

A new 3,000-square-foot residence calls for a deposit of \$1,200. Fees for demolition jobs are higher, while roof tear-offs of any size are a flat \$200. Most projects under 500 square feet — remodeling as well as new construction — are exempt, as are specific kinds of jobs, such as building or replacing carports, decks, balconies, and fences.

Once a project is complete, contractors have 180 days to submit a copy of the original waste-management form and

receipts from either the recycling facilities or the recipients of donated material. If they met the 50-percent diversion figure, their deposit is refunded in full; if not, it’s reduced according to the actual diversion rate.

Administrator Stephen Grealey says that the program — which is the largest of its kind in the country — has been designed to be flexible and builder-friendly. For instance, he says, builders can choose the convenient but pricey option of having a certified recycling company provide a single dumpster and do all the collection and sorting (at a cost of about \$65 per ton). Or they can save money by sorting the waste and hauling it to the recycler themselves.

For that matter, there’s nothing to prevent a builder from filing the required waste-management plan, sending all the waste to the landfill (and paying the tipping fee) and letting the city keep the deposit. Final inspections and certificates of occupancy do not hinge on completing the process.

Grealey says he’s confident that builders will readily adapt to the new regulations, though he concedes that his staff will have to do “a lot of hand-holding and monitoring for the first year or so.” And he says that the city — which recently hired two additional code enforcement officers and two recycling specialists — is committed to making the program work. “Once people understand how it works it won’t be a big deal,” he adds. “Will people put down their deposits and walk away? I don’t think so.” — *J.V.*