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## Vulnerability and Exploitation in Los Angeles County Meatpacking and Food Processing

UCLA Labor Center

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Los Angeles County has been a regional hotspot for meatpacking and food processing for more than a century. Drawn to the area by sprawling rail connections to other large and lucrative markets, national producers and smaller localized operations capitalized on the region's booming population and steady economic growth. Over the course of the 20th century, the combination of enormous consumer demand and an abundant supply of low-wage and immigrant workers made Los Angeles County a powerhouse for meatpacking and food processing.

But over the last several decades, corporate consolidations and deregulation in the industry has significantly transformed the national and local landscape. On a national scale, only a few firms dominate and control beef, pork, and chicken processing, to such an extent that they are able to maximize corporate profits while exerting greater pressures on all levels of the supply chain, from raising animals to stocking grocery stores. This unchecked corporate power has led to worsening outcomes for farmers and volatile prices and heightened food safety risks for consumers, as well as depressed wages and deteriorating working conditions for workers.

In Los Angeles County, and the industrial city of Vernon in particular, unionized processing facilities have either shut down operations or left town, relocating to the South and Midwest. In their wake, small and midsize facilities have carried on the work of processing animal proteins for Los Angeles County, largely employing the same workforce, albeit now via an opaque system of temporary staffing agencies. In Vernon, Los Angeles County's hub for beef, pork, and food processing, these staffing agencies typically place workers in long-term positions with little opportunity for advancement or promotion. Poultry processing is less formalized, and takes place mostly on the outskirts of Vernon, where workers are paid per piece—rather than per hour—to cut and debone chicken.

Through direct testimony from 47 workers—gathered during interviews and focus groups—as well as a broad literature review and a comprehensive analysis of industry and workforce data, including census and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) records—we learned how the industry is structured to take advantage of a uniquely vulnerable population of workers, while undermining their ability to organize or fight for better wages and working conditions. Across all food processing subsectors we analyzed, we found that workers faced a set of shared challenges. The following key findings demonstrate the social and economic harms associated with the systematic evisceration of a once robust local industry that formerly provided dignified long-term employment, but has now been replaced with an ad hoc network of precarious and contingent work.

## Systematic Wage Theft

Workers in both meatpacking and poultry processing regularly experience numerous forms of wage theft, including late or withheld paychecks, meal and rest break violations, off-the-clock work, unreimbursed personal expenses, and minimum wage violations. Because poultry processing workers are often paid per piece, rather than per hour, they are particularly prone to wage theft. Food processing workers often remain unaware of their rights and lack formal means of recourse within employer human resource structures to address these violations.

## Hiring Practices Exploit Vulnerable Workers

By employing predominantly immigrant workers recruited through social and familial networks, employers create and maintain an information asymmetry regarding terms of employment and workers' rights. Many workers do not receive sufficient documentation of their hours or wages, a violation of California state law, and workers regularly receive employment contracts in languages they do not understand. Especially in poultry processing, these practices have led to egregious and systemic labor violations, including child labor.

## The Role of Staffing Agencies

Staffing agencies in meatpacking and poultry processing provide employers with the administrative capacity to handle personnel management, while ultimately insulating employers from scrutiny and oversight. Staffing agencies play a dual role in the industry's workforce management: they help food processing companies navigate labor demand uncertainty by providing a flexible quantity of workers, yet they simultaneously sustain a class of long-term employees in "perma-temp" labor arrangements with little opportunity for career advancement.

## Culture of Retaliation and Harassment

Workers reported a pervasive culture of verbal abuse from supervisors, fomenting a fear of retaliation that undermines worker power and prevents workers from speaking up against clear violations. Supervisors often demonstrate favoritism, sexism, and ageism when selecting workers for promotion to lead positions. These practices give supervisors unchecked power over line workers, sowing discord and resentment among colleagues.

## Precarious and Unsafe Working Conditions

Both meatpacking and poultry processing workers contend with dangerous working conditions, especially relating to their ability to meet unrealistic production quotas that require impossible or unsafe operating speeds. Coupled with a lack of proper training and subpar safety protocols, this environment leads to an alarmingly high frequency of injuries in these subsectors.

## Poor Food Safety Enforcement

Substandard working conditions are directly linked to substandard food safety outcomes. Existing regulatory frameworks prove to be insufficient or inconsistent in practice, leading to a general sense of negligence where both worker safety and food safety is deprioritized.


Our qualitative findings, paired with an analysis of industry operations, highlight the need for significant interventions in and reforms to the local food processing sector. To better serve the Los Angeles County community—including workers, consumers, and locally-owned small businesses—the path to achieving greater food justice outcomes should begin with rebuilding a local high-road meatpacking and food processing industry. In order to pursue this ambitious yet urgent objective, we recommend the following:

## Opportunities for Immediate Action

- ✔ Establish a worker center in Vernon
- ✔ Prohibit piece-rate compensation in food processing sector
- ✔ Expand language access for employment contracts in California labor code
- ✔ Create High Road Training Partnerships (HRTPs) in meatpacking and food processing to bolster local industry
- ✔ Strengthen worker protection standards for public procurement in Los Angeles County

## Long-term Strategic Considerations

- ✔ Identify champion advocates in policy and administration
- ✔ Build coalitions across related sectors
- ✔ Demand data transparency across food supply chains
- ✔ Learn from successful campaigns in other jurisdictions

# INTRODUCTION

Meatpacking and food processing in the United States is a highly profitable, labor-intensive industry.[1] Historically, the meatpacking industry has concentrated its operations in the South and Midwest, taking advantage of lower wages, declining union density, and an exceedingly cooperative relationship between industry titans, policymakers, and regulators.[2] The industry has achieved unprecedented consolidation at the national level, with the largest firms getting even larger and more powerful, realizing record profits in recent years.[3] Today, just a few firms control the lion's share of the beef, pork, and chicken processing supply chains.[4]

## TERMINOLOGY

**Meatpacking** refers to the handling and processing of beef, pork, and lamb.

**Poultry processing** refers to the cutting, deboning, and preparation of chicken and turkey.

**Food processing** is used more generally to refer to operations that do not specialize in strictly meat or poultry, but typically produce prepared or frozen items that may or may not include animal protein.

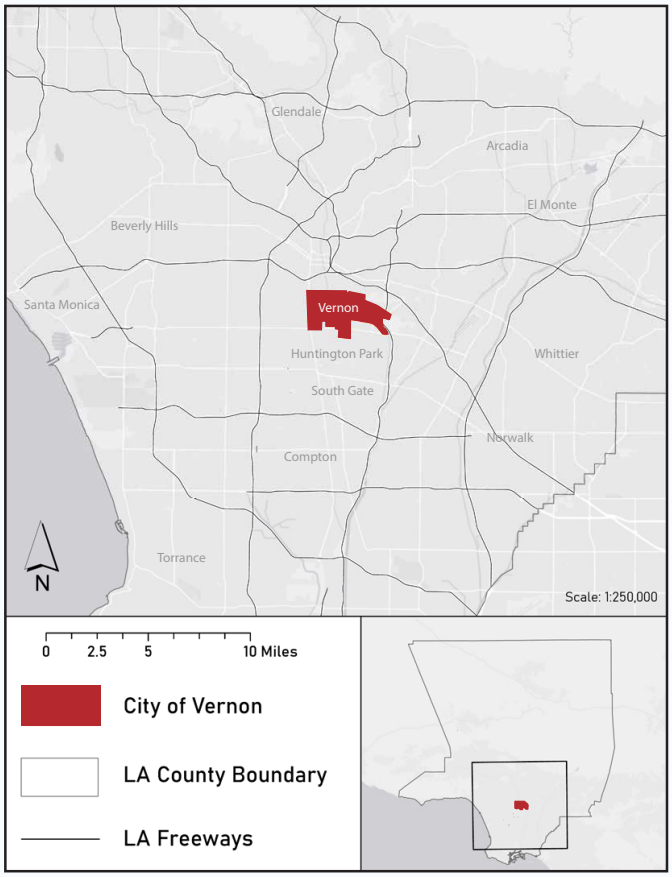
Heightened competition for market share has produced a race to the bottom, as firms aim to bolster their profit margins by reducing labor costs, maintaining substandard working conditions, and undermining collective bargaining efforts.[5] The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these dynamics, as processing plants continued to operate without sufficient health and safety protocols in place, leading to an infection and death rate for workers far above the national average.[6] Meatpacking and food processing workers are an important part of the frontline of American manufacturing, undergirding local, regional, and national economies, yet often remain out of sight and out of mind for the average consumer.

With its comparatively higher state and local minimum wages and progressive employee protections, California seems an unlikely place for this kind of work to thrive. However, in a select few locations across the state, a certain composition of factors—workforce demographics, access to lucrative consumer markets, and lax regulatory oversight—has enabled meatpacking and food processing employers to create and sustain industrial microcosms resembling the larger meatpacking industries of the South and Midwest. The working conditions in this local industry stand in stark contrast to the more progressive image often attributed to California.

The working conditions in this local industry stand in stark contrast to the more progressive image often attributed to California.

## Vernon, CA: The Powerhouse of Los Angeles County

Situated just four miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles is the city of Vernon. Zoned almost entirely for industrial use, Vernon has the fewest residents of any city in the state. While the residential population is just 222 people, more than 50,000 workers flow in and out of city limits every day, commuting to one of the several dozen meatpacking and food processing facilities within Vernon's 5.2 square miles.[7] Over the last several decades, Vernon has earned a reputation as a sanctuary for unscrupulous businesses, documented political corruption, unstable governance, and environmental degradation.[8]

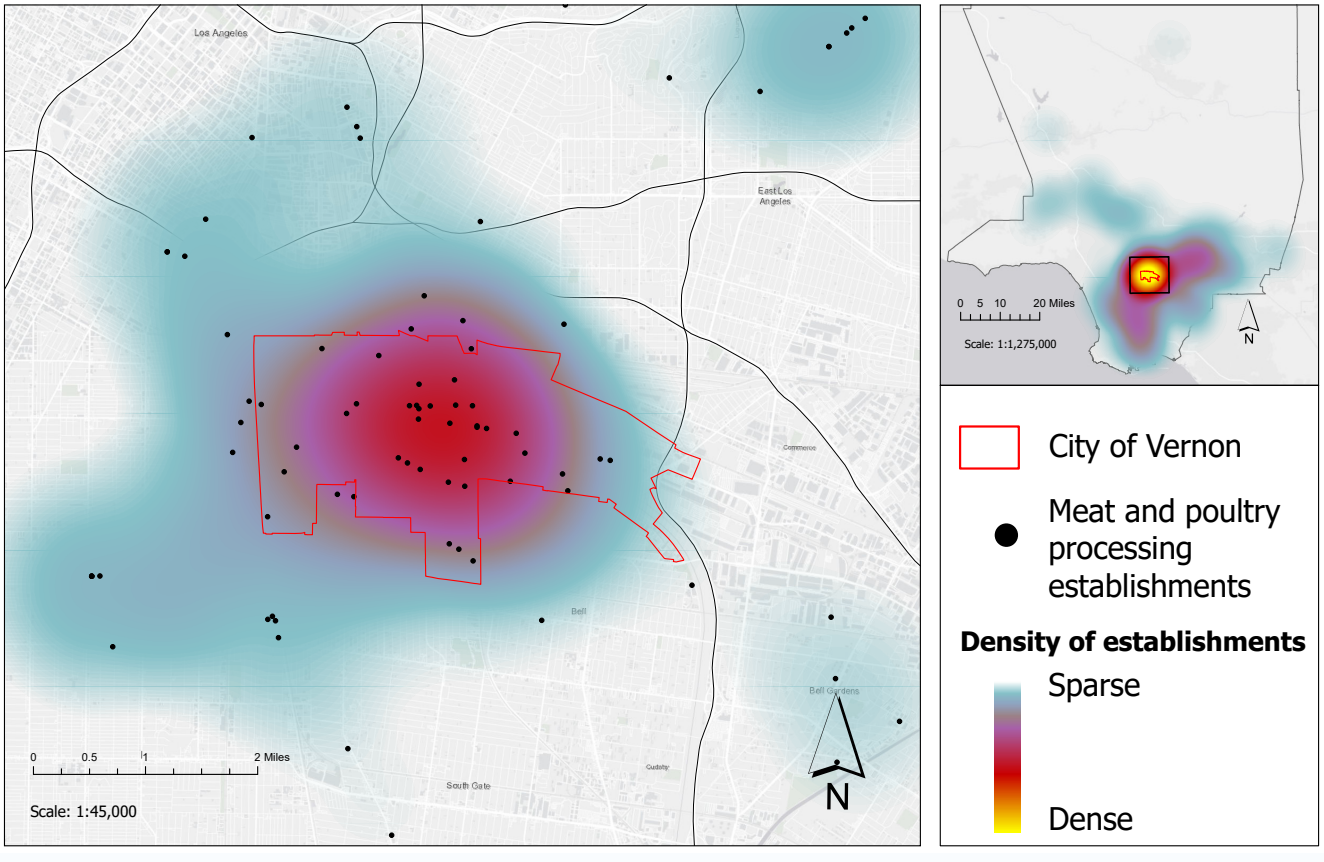



Within Vernon alone, there are 34 establishments registered with the USDA and approved for either meat processing, poultry processing, or both—nearly seven plants per square mile.[9] This is the most significant concentration of meat and poultry processing

| Table 1: USDA Licenses for Meat and Poultry Processing in Los Angeles County, 2025 | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Total Number of Licenses** | **Density** (Plants per Square Mile) |
| **City of Los Angeles** | 40 | 0.08 |
| **Vernon** | 34 | 6.53 |
| **El Monte & South El Monte** | 19 | 1.53 |
| **City of Industry** | 14 | 1.12 |
| **Gardena** | 11 | 1.87 |
| **Santa Fe Springs** | 9 | 1.01 |
| **Monterey Park** | 6 | 0.78 |

Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service – Meat, Poultry and Egg Product Inspection Directory[10]

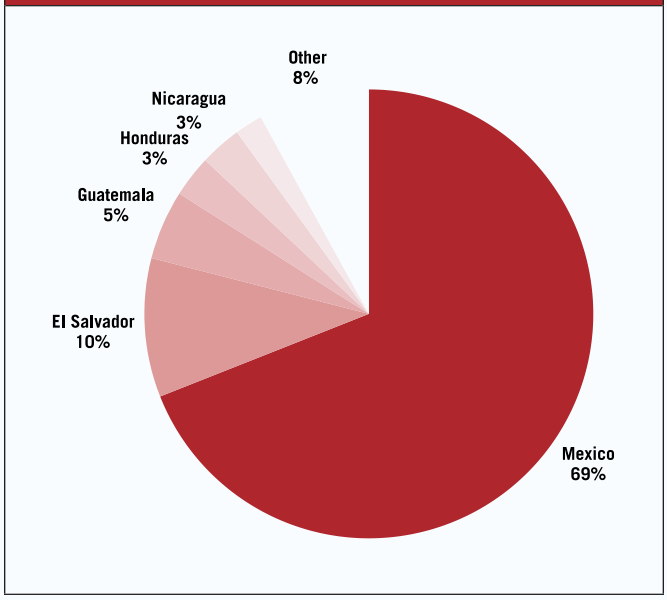
**Figure 1: Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities in Selected Counties in Southern California, 2024**




Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service – Meat, Poultry and Egg Product Inspection Directory[11]

Historically, many of the large food processing facilities in Vernon were unionized, providing long term employment to a predominantly immigrant workforce. However, in recent years many larger, national employers have shuttered their operations in Vernon.[12] This shift has catalyzed major changes to the local industry, in both Vernon and surrounding areas, drastically transforming the day-to-day experience and career prospects for thousands of workers. As of 2023, meatpacking and food processing workers in Los Angeles County are predominantly people of color, with Latinx individuals making up 88% of the workforce.[13] Nearly three-quarters are foreign-born, primarily from Mexico, with smaller segments from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Many of these workers shoulder significant family responsibilities: 39% are heads of household, over half support children, and one in four is the sole earner for their family.

**Figure 2: Selected Demographic Characteristics, Meatpacking and Food Processing Workers in Los Angeles County, 2023**




Source: Authors' analysis of the American Community Survey, 2019–2023

Despite their essential contributions to the region's food processing industry, many face economic insecurity. Although nearly all work full time—often placed in positions through temporary staffing agencies—more than two-thirds earn low wages, and nearly one in five rely on food stamps to make ends meet. Nearly half of all workers are rent-burdened.[14]

**Table 2: Economic Insecurity Among Meatpacking and Food Processing Workers in Los Angeles County, 2023**

| |
|---|
| **71% earn low wages** |
| **46% are rent-burdened** |
| **18% rely on food stamps** |

Source: Authors' analysis of the American Community Survey, 2019–2023

Meatpacking and food processing companies have strategically targeted immigrant workers, leveraging their limited job opportunities and precarious legal status to maintain low wages and substandard working conditions. Critics argue that this strategy intentionally recruits individuals with limited English proficiency and minimal knowledge of U.S. labor laws, fostering a workforce unlikely to report abuses or unsafe conditions.[15] Additionally, there have been recent reports of child labor in Los Angeles poultry processing, a finding corroborated during data collection for this report.[16] These issues emphasize the critical yet precarious position of meatpacking and food processing workers in Los Angeles County.

## About this Study

This report provides a comprehensive examination of the meatpacking and food processing industries in Los Angeles County, informed by direct testimony from 47 workers, gathered during interviews and focus groups, as well as a broad literature review and industry analysis. Between March and May 2024, our team conducted four focus groups in Spanish with meatpacking and food processing workers, exploring their perspectives on working conditions, employment history, health and safety, hours, pay, and experiences with management and staffing agencies. In July 2024, we conducted seven in-depth interviews with workers to delve further into these issues.[17]

Our goal is to illuminate this often opaque sector, which is structurally prone to widespread labor violations despite its central role in local, regional, and national economies. Developed in collaboration with El Centro de Entrenamiento y Liderazgo Para Trabajadores (El Centro), this study engages community stakeholders and centers the experiences and knowledge of workers to better understand and address the systemic issues facing the industry.

## Report Roadmap

In the introduction, we provide an overview of the meatpacking and food processing industry in Los Angeles County.

**Section I**
examines structural shifts in the industry and changes in employment practices, including the increasing role of staffing agencies in the sector.

**Go to section**

**Section II**
explores workers' wages and their experiences with piece-rate systems, overtime, meal and rest breaks, and work-related expenses.

**Go to section**

**Section III**
focuses on workplace culture, including workers' experiences with discrimination and retaliation.

**Go to section**

**Section IV**
addresses health and safety practices, along with implications for consumers.

**Go to section**

By elevating workers' voices and situating their stories within a broader analysis of the industry, we aim to identify possible points of intervention. While more research is urgently needed, the report concludes with recommended immediate and long-term strategies to support a more sustainable and equitable food processing industry in Los Angeles and beyond.

# I FROM HIGH ROAD TO LOW ROAD

Corporate consolidation on a national level, paired with declining rates of union membership amid ongoing contractions of the local meatpacking and food processing industry, has put newfound pressures on the Los Angeles workforce.[18] Over the last several decades, "high road" employment principles once modeled by some union employers in Vernon, including investments in workforce development, environmental sustainability, and democratic workplaces, have given way to ubiquitous "low road" standards.[19] In an effort to bolster narrow margins while a greater share of profits is concentrated upstream by multinational conglomerates, smaller local and regional firms now compete primarily on price. This means undercutting labor and environmental protections, ultimately putting downward pressure on wages and degrading working conditions.[20] Such dynamics have led to a significant transformation of the local industry.

## Temporary Jobs Have Replaced Union Jobs

As unionized meatpacking and food processing facilities have steadily shut down or vacated the Southern California region (and in particular Vernon) over the last decade, a different model of employment has emerged to fill the void.[21] While the nature of the work itself has not significantly changed, the full-time positions with competitive pay and benefits—at facilities that have historically been unionized—have been largely replaced with contingent and unpredictable temporary jobs coordinated by a network of staffing agencies. Staffing agencies play a critical role in sustaining the local meatpacking and food processing sectors, and provide an efficient mechanism for recruiting and maintaining a vulnerable workforce subjected to systemic exploitation.

This transformation of food processing reflects wider trends in an evolving labor market for low-wage industries. The staffing industry represents a surprisingly large—and growing—portion of the local and national labor markets. In 2023, more than two million workers in California were placed in temporary employment through staffing agencies, collectively receiving nearly $35 billion in wages.[22] The staffing industry has rapidly expanded over the last two decades, with total national sales doubling from $92 billion in 2004 to $186 billion in 2022.[23]

Work categorized as "industrial"—which includes food processing—represents more than one-third of the industry's job placements.[24]

But temporary work, despite common assumptions, does not mean part-time work. Nationally, three in four temporary workers are placed in full-time positions, equivalent to the full-time rate observed in the overall workforce.[25] Research has shown that work placements through staffing agencies are not always stepping stones toward direct employment—as the staffing industry lobby proudly boasts—but instead they often entail the phenomenon of "permatemping." Under such an arrangement, the National Employment Law Project has argued, "temporary workers can languish in the same position for several months and even years—working side-by-side with permanent employees without ever being offered a permanent position."[26]

The permatemp arrangement reflects the experience of most meatpacking and food processing workers in Vernon and the surrounding areas. Nearly every worker we spoke with described the challenging process of navigating a web of local staffing agencies seeking placement in the types of positions they had previously held under direct or unionized employment. Today, most workers remain largely in the dark about the relationship between the staffing agency they work for and the employer who operates the factory where they work. Yet workers expressed feeling as if they have no other options for employment. One meatpacking worker we interviewed conveyed this reality simply: "I lasted 16 years on the line. They never increased my wage."

### The Dodger Dog: From Union to Temp

For decades, the iconic "Dodger Dog" was not only a ballpark staple, but also a product proudly made by unionized workers at the Farmer John facility in Vernon. Amid widespread industry consolidation, Farmer John was acquired by the multinational conglomerate Smithfield Foods in 2016.[27] Three years later, Smithfield chose to not renew its longstanding contract with the Dodgers, and in 2023 shut down Farmer John operations altogether, leaving nearly 2,000 workers out of a job.[28]

As documented in this report, many of those displaced workers now navigate an opaque and contingent network of staffing agencies to secure temporary placement in non-union positions at plants in Vernon. Meanwhile, the Dodger Dog remains in production, yet is now made at a non-union plant that utilizes temporary workers.[29] The transition from union-made Dodger Dogs to a non-union, subcontracted production model reflects the wider erosion of stable, high-road employment in the Los Angeles food supply chain, and shows the role large institutions can play in shaping employment outcomes in their communities.

## Food Processing Companies are Shielded from Scrutiny and Liability

The working relationships between food processing companies and staffing agencies are often intentionally extremely opaque. While both entities typically have some form of public footprint, there is no reliable way to untangle the network of relations that connects one to the other. In practice, both sides of this partnership benefit from such a shrouded arrangement. Agencies can plead ignorance of the actual working conditions and workplace treatment of the individuals they technically employ and rely on unscrupulous business practices, while food processing companies functionally insulate themselves from liability by outsourcing administrative issues of personnel management, including (and especially) issues relating to immigration status or pay.

Through an extensive analysis of data from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) supplemented by direct worker testimonies, we were able to map much of the Vernon staffing agency landscape. Because staffing agencies serve as the employer of record but not the operator of the actual worksite where injuries and health hazards occur, OSHA inspection and violation data is one of the few places where agencies (by name) and food processing companies (by registered worksite address) are publicly linked to one another. Through this method, we documented more than 50 different staffing agencies operating in the area that provides workers to food processing facilities.[30]

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## Food Processing Companies are Shielded from Scrutiny and Liability

We identified three primary types of staffing agencies operating in the local food processing sector:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Major firms with national presence |
| 2 | Well-established regional firms |
| 3 | "Straw" agencies that only serve individual food processing companies and are often owned or operated by representatives of these companies. |

Over the course of our research, we found considerable similarities in the employment practices—recruitment, wages, scheduling, and benefits—of each of these three types of agencies, despite the significant differences in agency size and their respective degrees of formal business infrastructure.

Staffing agencies, both large and small, provide labor to prospective employers on demand and at a premium. In low-wage industries like meatpacking and food processing, companies are willing to pay more than the hourly minimum wage to staffing agency intermediaries, who take their cut and pay out the remainder to the workers in the form of the hourly minimum wage, as reported in interviews with workers and pay stubs provided for review.

This gap indicates a clear value proposition for the food processing companies. Our analysis demonstrates three key value-adds justifying this premium:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | **Administrative capacity**<br><br>As the "employer of record," staffing agencies take on a food processing company's administrative burden, including matters of personnel management. This is particularly beneficial to food processing employers when workers require time off or sick leave, as an agency can supply additional temporary workers more easily than a food processing company could replace a direct hire. |
| 2 | **Flexibility**<br><br>Staffing agencies enable food processing companies to exercise a greater degree of flexibility in their workforce than is possible through direct employment. Given the unpredictable nature of food processing supply chains, this adaptability is particularly valuable. The supply chains for poultry, pork, fish, and beef differ in significant ways that shape the final stages of production occurring in Vernon and surrounding areas. Beef and fish production, for example, tends to be less stable, leading to greater fluctuations in labor demand, while poultry and pork producers are able to more effectively control and predict |
| 3 | **Liability shielding**<br><br>Staffing agencies provide a legal layer between workers and the entities that control working conditions and production processes. This opacity is valuable for food processing companies, because it insulates them from more direct scrutiny related to discriminatory hiring practices, wage and hour violations, and health and safety violations. In poultry processing especially, small and mid-size processors often own the staffing agencies that recruit and maintain their workforce, using these "straw" employers as a layer in complex corporate structures designed to obscure ownership and, in the event of illegal business practices, to shield owners from liability.[31] |

This arrangement between staffing agencies and food processing companies, which took root in the wake of union facilities shuttering or leaving the region, has fostered the emergence of a "low road" industry. It allows bad actors to escape scrutiny from regulators and policymakers, and directly undermines worker protections while applying downward pressure on wages and working conditions.


II

# CHRONIC LOW WAGES & SYSTEMIC WAGE THEFT

Terms of employment in the meatpacking and food processing industries are often characterized by low pay, piece-rate systems, and instances of wage theft, all of which contribute to the precarious conditions in the sector. Such terms are rarely standardized across staffing agencies or worksites, and often remain opaque to workers, a factor that directly contributes to workplace exploitation. Workers we interviewed reported that when employment contracts were provided, they were printed exclusively in English, despite data showing that nearly three in five workers are not proficient.[32] Many workers who speak only Spanish or a regional Indigenous language said they were forced to sign documents they did not understand.

Analysis of the American Community Survey reveals that 71% of food processing workers earn low wages, defined as less than $18.52 per hour, or two-thirds of the 2022 median wage for full-time workers in California. This rate is more than double the 37% of all other workers in the county earning low wages. Given the grueling nature of work in this sector, workers felt that such low compensation constituted a clear injustice; as one put it, “The stress we carry, we practically kill ourselves, just to make enough to cover a bit of what we spend every month.”

### Poultry Workers are Paid Less Than the Minimum Wage

While meatpacking and food processing companies typically pay an hourly wage through temporary staffing agencies, the local poultry industry operates on a different model. Based on our focus group with workers, we found that poultry workers exclusively work under a piece-rate system instead of a defined hourly wage, whereby workers are compensated per unit produced—in this case, boxes or bins that have been filled with cuts of raw chicken to a specified weight.

While piece-rate is not inherently against California law, employers are not permitted to use a piece-rate system to pay below the minimum hourly wage. Our focus groups and interviews with workers suggest, however, that minimum wage violations enabled by inconsistent and opaque piece-rate systems are rampant in poultry processing. Further, we found a startling lack of awareness by workers of their rights, with many workers preemptively citing the piece-rate system as the reason that they do not receive adequate compensation for overtime, breaks, or time spent waiting for food products to arrive or thaw before processing. "Nobody complains," said one Indigenous Guatemalan worker when asked about not getting paid overtime, "because we all know that we're there on our own and we get paid per box or per bag."

Poultry workers in our focus groups reported a recent pay rate of $3.00 per 40-pound box, although this rate occasionally fluctuates up or down by 10 to 20 cents with no explanation, based on factors out of the workers' control. Based on this reported rate, an individual worker must debone more than 200 pounds of chicken per hour to earn the equivalent of minimum wage, a benchmark that is nearly impossible to meet.

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Poultry workers in our focus groups and interviews also shared that they do not have access to records of their hours, wages, or productivity, which directly violates a California state law requiring itemized pay stubs. Such practices have produced a vast information asymmetry between employers and workers—and likely regulators as well—that systematically obscures widespread wage violations.

## Workers are Often Unable to Take Full Meal and Rest Breaks

Across all focus groups and interviews, we found that workers were regularly denied legally required breaks or had their meal and rest breaks cut short. In some cases, this was a byproduct of strict production goals and the piece-rate compensation system, but in others it was more clearly a result of unilateral action taken by management.

Under California Law, workers are legally entitled to a 30-minute meal break when working more than five hours a day, and an additional 30-minute meal break when shifts extend beyond 12 hours. In addition, workers are legally entitled to a 10-minute rest period for every four hours worked. These requirements apply regardless of whether the worker is paid per hour, or per piece as is standard in poultry processing. However, workers in our

focus groups reported insufficient time to take these breaks. In addition to the time required to take off their boots, helmets, and other protective gear before leaving the factory floor, workers reported that it takes them 10 minutes to change out of their gear and another 10 minutes to walk to the parking lot. This process effectively reduces their lunch break by 20 minutes, making it difficult to take shorter, 10 minute breaks after working for 4 hours. The time lost in gear change and walking also discourages workers from taking bathroom breaks. One worker shared, "I got really ill and I got an infection for holding and that's when I started to ask for permission, because I used to just hold and now I get scolded for taking longer than needed."

Because poultry workers often have to wait for deliveries or allow chicken to defrost while maintaining production quotas, they frequently cannot take consistent breaks. If workers are required to rush to meet a quota after delays, they often skip breaks altogether. In legal proceedings reviewed during our analysis, poultry processing supervisors testified that workers could take rest breaks at any time, though they admitted that workers usually did not take them because they were concerned about deboning fewer chickens and therefore losing pay."[33] Workers in our focus groups shared that breaks were infrequent, and reported that supervisors even followed them to the bathroom to limit unproductive time. In some cases, one worker said, they felt that management "assumed that they were doing drugs," while they were actually just trying to eat, as their meal breaks had either been missed or cut short. When poultry workers do receive breaks, they are generally unpaid.

## Workers are Overworked and Rarely Paid for Overtime

Poultry workers from our focus groups reported having to work overtime "almost every day," regularly working shifts up to 16 hours. Despite labor code dictating that piece-rate workers be paid overtime rates commensurately for shifts extending beyond eight hours, these workers received no increase to base piece-rate pay, indicating another form of wage theft. Because these workers are paid per piece, they are effectively compelled to log much longer shifts to earn an amount they deem sufficient.

Meatpacking workers employed by staffing agencies felt their schedules to be much more precarious, and often contingent on their relationship with management. Further, they seemed to implicitly understand that the workers they worked alongside who were directly employed enjoyed more standardized and predictable schedules. Unstable scheduling practices that require workers to be on call for last minute schedule changes, which is standard for these workers, forces them to stay alert and remain prepared to work at any moment, without additional pay and with the looming prospect of disciplinary action if they are not responsive enough to these urgent calls.[34] Workers conveyed a general sense that if they were to refuse to work overtime or not answer their phones while off the clock, they would be penalized by receiving fewer future work opportunities, or dropped entirely from the staffing agencies' hiring lists.

Without collective bargaining agreements—once common in Vernon—there are no legal limits to how many overtime hours workers can be asked (or effectively forced) to work, which puts them at greater risk for workplace injuries and exhaustion. This is compounded by the fact that many workers in both poultry and meatpacking do not get regular days off, and they often work many consecutive days with shifts extending beyond eight hours. Another recent study found that workers in the food production supply chain have the

highest rate of "mandatory overtime," a finding reflected in our interviews and focus groups.[35] Workers we spoke with shared how such demanding conditions impact other areas of their lives. Chronic overwork, studies have shown, does not allow sufficient time for adequate recovery from the physical toll that this form of work takes on one's body, and it prevents workers from being able to tend to their personal and family lives.[36]

## Workers Regularly Have Issues Getting Paid


Poultry workers were regularly paid late, and on some occasions were asked to wait before cashing their checks. Workers said that management seemed unbothered by late paychecks, even when workers complained about rent and bills being due. One poultry worker reported that they were offered an extra ten cents per box if they were willing to wait another week to be paid. Piece-rate pay also intentionally obscures the relationship between hours and wages, creating frequent disputes around paychecks that workers had little recourse to remedy. Sometimes, paychecks for poultry workers were split between cash and check, and attributed to unexplained "bonus" schemes that workers interpreted as a means of tax avoidance by their employers.

While staffing agencies typically provide a more structured form of employment compared to the less regimented network of poultry processors, many temporary workers still contend with a high degree of uncertainty around pay day. In our focus groups with workers employed by staffing agencies, many reported that they were paid with checks that either listed the agency itself or a different, unfamiliar third-party company that handles the payroll. It was common to find mistakes in tallying the total number of hours, and workers reported being uncompensated for missing or unmarked hours.

Additionally, workers were rarely reimbursed for gear and equipment they were required to purchase to perform their jobs. Poultry workers, for example, said they were expected to purchase their own knives, as well as other personal protective equipment, including specific boots that cost $150, $90 metal gloves, tweezers, goggles, coats, aprons, and hairnets that had to be frequently replaced. Meatpacking workers were typically supplied with an apron by their employers, but were personally responsible for procuring non-slip shoes and specialized gloves for handling very cold food products. In a few instances, the staffing agency would cover these costs to ensure that workers would not be turned away upon arrival for work on the line. In both cases, workers reported expenses going unreimbursed, in direct violation of California labor code, which dictates that expenses like these, which are necessary for performing core job functions, are the employer's responsibility.


III

# A CULTURE OF HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

Workers reported a widespread culture of verbal abuse from supervisors, fomenting a fear of retaliation that undermines worker power and prevents workers from speaking up against clear violations. Supervisors demonstrate favoritism, sexism, and ageism in selecting individual workers for promotion to the lead positions. These practices give supervisors unchecked power over the rest of the line workers, and sow discord and resentment among colleagues.

## Workers are Discriminated Against by Supervisors and Management

An employee of a local staffing agency explained during an interview that it was commonplace for food processing companies to seek workers based on stereotyped characteristics using coded language. For example, companies would request “small, inexperienced hands” or “inexperienced heavy lifters.” These requests by meatpacking and food processing employers were likely made in the interest of recruiting less

experienced workers that would be easier to control. These requests often included specific demographics: men for work that involved heavy lifting, younger workers, or only Spanish speakers. Requests like these could constitute unlawful discrimination, but the staffing agency would often find a way to tacitly adhere to the request and appoint the requested workers nonetheless.

There was also a general understanding by employees of this staffing agency that relatively younger workers would be less tolerant to mistreatment and harsh working conditions. Younger workers, the staffing agency employee suggested, were more likely to speak up against perceived harms in the workplace than their older colleagues, including around issues of managerial favoritism and required breaks. Older workers, on the other hand, tended to be more fearful of losing their jobs and being unable to pay bills or "put food on the table," and so could be seen as more acquiescent to workplace challenges. Across our interviews and focus groups, it became clear that some food processing companies relied on staffing agencies to facilitate selective placement of specific types of workers to better control the workplace.

## Supervisors and Management Demonstrate Favoritism

Across focus groups and interviews, we found favoritism to be a common issue experienced by workers. Managers privileged certain workers over others in treatment and delegation of job duties. Some workers, especially older female workers who comprise the majority of the sector's workforce, described being treated less kindly by supervisors than younger colleagues, and in some cases being passed up for leadership roles. One worker noted that the manager at their company would demonstrate clear preferential treatment only "if you're young and beautiful."

> Temporary workers were often relegated to tasks deemed "heavier," "harder," and "messier."

At worksites where direct and temporary workers operated in tandem, temporary workers were often relegated to tasks deemed "heavier," "harder," and "messier." These temporary workers described the prospect of gaining direct employment as a process largely driven by favoritism. In making these hiring decisions, management showed clear preference for temporary workers who displayed a willingness to work at potentially dangerous speeds. As one worker put it, "The faster they were, the better chances they had of being hired...and that is always an open door for all kinds of injuries."

## A Widespread Culture of Harassment and Disrespect

Workers are routinely disrespected and harassed at their workplace without any recourse for reporting these instances of abuse. Fearing retaliation and dismissal, workers often felt forced to withstand these transgressions. One worker recounted a particularly challenging relationship with a supervisor who would forbid workers from speaking to one another and who would threateningly greet workers with remarks like "Welcome to the room of horror!"

Workers reported occasional tensions between colleagues, but described how management regularly created a hostile work environment that would further flare up these tensions, sowing discord between workers. One meatpacking worker recalled being treated "like a dog" by their employer, who would direct them around by shouting commands like "HEY! HERE!" A poultry worker echoed this sentiment, describing how supervisors are quick to humiliate workers by undermining their worth and telling them they are disposable: "They yell at you and show us the door. [They] tell us that we're welcome to leave whenever we want because nobody is obligated to stay."

Often, management overlooks yelling and confrontational behavior so long as the workers are able to meet their production goals. Management's failure to rectify these issues clearly demonstrates that production goals and the bottom line are more important than workers' psychological safety.

## Workers are Fearful of Intimidation and Retaliation

In our focus groups with meatpacking and poultry workers, we found repeated accounts of management and supervisors retaliating against workers after learning of legal complaints filed with the California Department of Industrial Relations. In one particularly stark example, a group of newly hired workers were explicitly told that they would have never been hired if management had known they had filed a labor complaint in their previous job, which had alleged widespread wage violations. After several workers were fired, their colleagues demanded that management justify the grounds for termination. Ultimately, management shared a letter outlining their reasoning, which accused the workers of underperforming in their job despite providing no evidence.

Temporary workers reported a general consensus that speaking up against workplace violations or filing formal complaints is met with punitive action, including increased surveillance or dismissal. In one instance where a worker filed a complaint, employees from their staffing agency began to closely monitor them and make daily phone calls about the worker's behavior and whereabouts. This worker said they felt "trapped" by this increased surveillance, and ultimately lost their job, in an abrupt decision by their staffing agency supervisor that the worker perceived as direct retaliation: "The first opportunity she had to lay me off, she laid me off."

According to the staffing agency employee we interviewed, agencies prefer to hire workers "who don't complain." Certain workers earn reputations for such behavior, news of which travels between agencies and food processing management through word of mouth. Based on the information that circulates through this network, agencies effectively label workers as "hireable" or "not hireable," and those who have been deemed problematic are screened out whenever they call an agency looking for work. These practices have instilled a culture of fear among workers, who come to feel precariously on the verge of losing their jobs at any moment.

According to the staffing agency employee we interviewed, agencies prefer to hire workers "who don't complain."


IV

# DANGEROUS WORKPLACES HARM WORKERS AND CONSUMERS

Both meatpacking and poultry processing workers contend with dangerous working conditions, especially relating to their ability to meet unrealistic production quotas requiring impossible or unsafe operating speeds.[37] Along with a general lack of training and subpar safety protocols, there is an alarmingly high frequency of injuries in these subsectors.[38] Such substandard working conditions directly link to substandard food safety outcomes. Existing regulatory frameworks prove to be insufficient or inconsistent in practice, leading to a general sense of negligence where both worker safety and food safety is deprioritized.

> Substandard working conditions directly link to substandard food safety outcomes.


## Management Prioritizes Production Speed over Worker Safety

In meatpacking facilities like those in Vernon, much of the operation is mechanized. Workers are stationed on a line, working in small teams tending to products as they pass through processing machines and along conveyor belts. Lead workers are typically responsible for managing the line speed, which determines how quickly the belts and machines move product. Leads adjust line speeds depending upon the number of workers, the specific products being prepared, and production goals set by management.

This arrangement allows management to exert near-total control over line workers, while at the same making ad hoc decisions about production quotas and staffing levels that leave workers in a constant state of uncertainty and tension while on the job.

One lead recounted one instance in which they decided to slow the line down as they noticed workers struggling to keep up. Management subsequently removed this lead from their position, and reprimanded them for being "too human" by failing to enforce stricter working conditions that maximized efficiency. In this case and others, management demonstrated clear favoritism to certain leads who were willing to prioritize higher line speeds even at the expense of safety or productivity.

A lead worker pointed to a clear tradeoff: after a certain point, increasing line speeds led to a noticeable decrease in both worker safety and quality of output: "You see how this area here is getting stressed? Look at the product, and how the quality is decreasing." In some cases, this also meant more total work was required, bringing overall productivity down: "Now they're repacking what the other person was not able to do well."

Workers in poultry plants do not work on a line, but instead work individually, deboning, cleaning, and cutting chicken products on metal tables with plastic covers. Yet because they are paid by the piece, rather than by total time worked, there is a clear incentive mechanism in place encouraging workers to prioritize speed over safety. Poultry workers wield large knives with no standardized training, and they routinely carry heavy boxes and bins through crowded work areas. Despite the dangerous nature of the work leading to high injury rates, workers we interviewed emphasized that employers take very little consideration over worker safety, including even for pregnant workers or minors.

## Dangerous Working Conditions Exacerbated by Lack of Training

Meatpacking and food processing workers employed through staffing agencies do not receive adequate training from the agency or the processing company. Some agencies do provide training to new workers; however, these are aimed primarily at addressing employer liability issues rather than worker safety issues, and those conducting the training have no direct experience in food processing. According to workers, these training sessions and other materials distributed to workers were often not even offered in a language they could understand.

Several meatpacking workers who participated in a focus group had previously held line lead positions at Farmer John, where a portion of the workforce had been unionized prior to the plant's closure in 2023.[39] These workers recalled more thorough safety and leadership training programs at Farmer John's compared to their current experience being placed through staffing agencies. This disparity highlights the impact that union representation can have on the quality of training and overall working conditions. For many, the more robust training at Farmer John more effectively prepared them for their jobs, and offered greater safety and job security than non-unionized environments.

Nearly all workers we spoke with, across poultry, meatpacking, and food processing, reported that they ultimately were required to learn through observation on the job. As one focus group participant put it, workers are "thrown into the production lines without any training." In practice, this leads to inefficiencies and creates potentially dangerous work environments for both new and veteran workers. The result of this setup is quick turnover of workers who feel unprepared to do the work required, as well as increased risk of workplace injury.

Some agencies do provide training to new workers; however, these are aimed primarily at addressing employer liability issues rather than worker safety issues, and those conducting the training have no direct experience in food processing.

## Workers Experience a High Frequency of Injuries on the Job

Food processing workers use sharp knives, lift heavy objects, operate dangerous machinery, and experience extreme temperatures on the job, often in cramped and overcrowded worksites. These hazards, combined with the fast-paced nature of this work and a lack of standardized training, unsurprisingly leads to a high rate of workplace injury and illness.[40] According to workers we spoke with, there is a widespread culture of disregard for worker safety, with few protocols in place to prevent or resolve these issues. As one worker put it, there is a clear tradeoff: "It's speed versus safety."

Poultry processing in particular exposes workers to extreme cold. One worker expressed, "The chicken is completely frozen, like rocks, and sometimes you can't get it through the machine because the machine can't press it because it's completely frozen." Workers reported that machinery and protective gear are not adequate for protecting workers. One worker explained that she had to purchase her own goggles after an incident when her eyes became red from a chemical splash.

Workers also reported that slippery floors create an unsafe workplace, resulting in frequent falls. These accidents are made more severe given that workers carry heavy items in close proximity to their colleagues. At a local seafood plant, workers described the way that the repetitive and fast-paced work of salmon processing produces a lot of excess fish oil. Over time, this oil spreads to the floors. Workers are not afforded sufficient time to clean, leading to an increased risk of slipping and falling. In a landmark study on food processing workers, the National Employment Law Project found that a failure to provide time for cleaning was one of the top causes of health and safety accidents in their workplaces.[41] Workers we interviewed described how an unsafe work environment not only poses immediate risks to physical health, but also creates anxiety about job security, as employers often do not rehire workers after they have been injured on the job.


Because meatpacking and food processing workers are forced to work at the pace dictated by the speed of the line, which is controlled by supervisors, there is constant pressure to keep up that heightens the risk of injury, especially repetitive stress injuries. Likewise, poultry workers who work under the piece-rate system described how the speed of production is incentivized above all else, often at the expense of safety protocols. Researchers who have examined health and safety outcomes across numerous industries where piece-rate systems are common have reached the same conclusion.[42] Because piece-rate compensation forces workers to prioritize quantity over quality, the risks to their physical health are directly correlated with food safety outcomes.

## Workers Report Substandard Food Safety Protocols

While there are strict guidelines on food safety protocols enforced by the USDA, workers report a culture of negligence and acquiescence on the part of inspectors, supervisors, and workers.[43] Food processing facilities like those in and around Vernon typically have dedicated USDA inspectors. These inspectors often oversee multiple facilities, yet workers noted that safety standards were regularly allowed to "slip" even when inspectors were present on site. When external investigators or corporate executives would arrive for inspections, workers told us, a brief period of increased scrutiny would be quickly followed by a return to "working normally," which meant a more lax approach to health and safety protocols. Workers at a seafood processing facility explained that whenever there are inspections or outside visitors, "that's the only time that [management] put things in order."

In some cases, USDA inspectors would flag certain violations, while intentionally overlooking other, more serious issues. One poultry worker recounted an inspection where pieces of raw chicken were directly touching a wooden pallet. "[The inspector] told me to lift it up from the wood. So I resolved the issue." But the worker was also well aware that the chicken had gone rancid by its overwhelming smell, which the inspector almost certainly noticed yet chose to ignore. The worker recounted, "The smell, I'm telling you, it was penetrating... it was impossible to sell this thing. It was totally bad. We should have thrown it in the trash."

"We should have thrown it in the trash."

This example, along with many others documented in focus groups and interviews, indicate widespread negligence by employers, which has direct implications for consumer food safety. Given that the fast-paced nature of this work was further accelerated by pressure from managers, food safety was rarely a priority. One worker, who prepares food for a major grocery chain with locations across Los Angeles, said that raw meat was not always handled at the appropriate temperatures to prevent foodborne illnesses. In seafood processing facilities, some quality control workers were regularly tasked with removing maggots from cuts of fish.

Perhaps the most egregious practice, according to a lead worker, was management instructing workers to relabel food products en masse to update expiration dates that had already passed. Across meatpacking and poultry processing facilities, workers reported recurring issues related to workplace cleanliness, including insufficient enforcement or full disregard for USDA standards. When workers tried to speak up about these cleanliness issues, management rejected their pleas, as one shared: "The fish go through the machines and they get dirty...we try to report it, but we get scolded instead."

Perhaps the most egregious practice, according to a lead worker, was management instructing workers to relabel food products en masse to update expiration dates that had already passed.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings and analysis make clear the urgent need for transformational change in the local meatpacking and food processing industry. Given the rapidly evolving and increasingly inhospitable national climate around worker protections and regulatory oversight in meatpacking and food processing, the stakes are higher than ever.[44] We recommend the following strategies and interventions to raise standards for workers, rebuild a local high-road industry, and ultimately pursue greater food justice outcomes for the broader Los Angeles community.

## Opportunities for Immediate Action

### Establish a Worker Center in Vernon

Worker centers are a proven and effective resource that empower, inform, and organize workers. This grassroots model has been scaled and replicated across the country and caters to workers based on their respective industry and/or based on racial, ethnic, or identity-based communities. The southern California region boasts numerous worker centers that prioritize workers' lived experiences and build worker power, often providing assistance with social services and access to resources.[46] For workers in meatpacking and food processing, a regional worker center focused on industry-specific challenges will build worker power, educate workers on their rights in the workplace, and facilitate access to state agencies and complaint processes to address wage, hour, and civil rights violations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Los Angeles County quickly spun up a network of public health councils, led by community-based organizations, to provide support to impacted workers, including displaced Farmer John workers as well as many others in Vernon. This model might serve as the blueprint for a promising approach to worker-centered advocacy and service provision.[47]

One successful facet of worker center programming in other sectors has been the development of "Know Your Rights" training curriculums for workers. When workers are informed of their rights, they are in a better position to assert them. Know Your Rights training, a model used by labor organizers across sectors, is an effective method of educating workers on the key pieces of California labor code that most directly impact their experience as workers. Our research has found that workers in meatpacking and food processing industries are likely to be immigrants and primarily speak non-English languages, which suggests a specific form of information asymmetry that employers take advantage of to maintain substandard or illegal working conditions. A widely accessible curriculum and training program designed and conducted by a local worker center that clearly outlines which common employer practices are illegal and shares ways to remedy these harms, Know Your Rights trainings offered in language- and culturally-appropriate formats form a critical first step toward a more equitable workplace for meatpacking and food processing workers.

## Prohibit Piece-Rate Compensation in the Sector

Our research has found that many local meatpacking workers, particularly those in poultry processing, are compensated based on the quantity of product they process, rather than the amount of time it takes. While not currently illegal, this piece-rate system exacerbates exploitation, allowing employers to easily commit multiple forms of wage theft while demanding a dangerous pace of work. This current reality in food processing mirrors the history of local garment production;[48] in 2023, the piece-rate system was outlawed in garment production, but only after decades of organizing and advocacy.[49] This win for workers sets a powerful precedent that meatpacking and food processing workers, organizers, and allies can learn from, and that policymakers should strive to replicate.

## Expand Language Access for Employment Contracts in California Labor Code

Workers often enter into employment contracts with staffing agencies under terms that are written in English. Given the preponderance of monolingual Spanish speakers in the meatpacking and food processing sectors, this language barrier represents a major mechanism through which staffing agencies and food processing employers are able to obscure access to information and further manipulate and exploit a vulnerable workforce. Local and state governments have a responsibility to ensure that workers are able to clearly understand and negotiate the terms of their employment. We recommend that the state labor code be amended to mandate language access for employment contracts to more meaningfully reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of California workers.

## Create High Road Training Partnerships to Bolster Local Industry

Workers shared that they have little recourse when they face harmful and illegal conditions in the workplace. Traditional human resource processes are inaccessible and do not take action on workers' behalf. Additionally, workers in our focus groups also shared a lack of training and limited career opportunities, issues that could be addressed through sector-specific workforce development strategies. Creating a High Road Training Partnership (HRTP) in the meatpacking and food processing industry →

would work to incentivize employers and encourage better working conditions. High Road Training Partnerships, which offer a holistic approach to workforce development rooted in collaboration between employers and employees, have been proven to lift working standards in other low-wage sectors in California that lack existing institutional support or have low union density. By creating an incentive structure that brings employers in voluntarily, workers and employers are able to productively collaborate in building a more just local economy. Rather than crack down on an out-of-control industry and seek to eliminate bad employers outright at the expense of the entire local industry, it is critical that policymakers work to create a pathway to dignified and sustainable jobs that also encourages employers to voluntarily come into compliance.

### Strengthen Worker Protection Standards for Public Procurement in Los Angeles County

The Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP), championed locally by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC), has gained significant traction in addressing structural inequities in the food supply chain by advocating for the inclusion of community-centered values in the public procurement process. Initiatives like these have succeeded by forming diverse constituencies across stakeholder groups, finding common cause between workers and other members of the community. Public procurement campaigns have proven successful across the country, effectively integrating higher standards for not only food supply chain workers, but also animal welfare, community health, demographic equity, and environmental sustainability into the purchasing programs of taxpayer-funded institutions. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, which spends nearly $500 million on student meals per year, has modified several key procurement contracts in response to GFPP campaigning, making its food service more humane and healthy.[50] Public procurement advocates in Los Angeles and elsewhere can strengthen their evaluation criteria by incorporating the findings in this report, which will further disincentive low-road employment trends like piece-rate compensation and temporary hiring arrangements.

## Long-Term Strategic Considerations

Over the course of this research, the role played by public institutions in shaping and supporting the local food supply chain emerged as a significant opportunity for intervention and reform. Major public institutions—including school districts, hospital systems, public colleges and universities, airports and transportation hubs, and parks and recreational facilities—are funded by taxpayers and are responsible for purchasing billions of dollars of food and employing thousands of food service workers.

Yet in the absence of organized campaigning, there is no guarantee that spending and investment decisions reflect community interests.[52] Likewise, without proactive policy making and advocacy, there is no assurance that this public sector food service workforce will have access to stable, dignified jobs that pay a livable wage. A multifaceted approach is needed, synthesizing strategies for indirect job creation like public procurement campaigns—which seek to gradually change the conditions under which food is produced, purchased, and distributed—as well as direct job creation, like investing in more progressive workforce development pipelines for public institutions.

Through a number of interviews with local food processing stakeholders, policy experts, and procurement specialists—including those with relevant experience in the garment, construction, and manufacturing sectors—we identified the following key insights that can inform a successful campaign leveraging public institutions to rebuild a high-road food supply chain in Los Angeles County:

### Identify Champion Advocates in Policy and Administration

Collaborate with key advocates in local, state, and federal policy making, as well as administrators at large public institutions, to drive meaningful changes in procurement and labor standards.

### Build Coalitions with Related Interest Groups

Find common cause with advocates in food justice, education equity, and animal welfare to expand the reach and impact of campaigns.

### Demand Data Transparency across Food Supply Chains

Push for greater transparency in the food production supply chain – including temporary staffing agencies – to enhance the enforcement and accountability of procurement policies and workplace protections.[51]

### Learn from successful campaigns in other jurisdictions

Study successful campaigns in other regions to inform the development and enforcement of procurement policies that are both actionable and effective.

# APPENDIX A: Methodology

This study was developed as a collaboration between El Centro de Entrenamiento y Liderazgo Para Trabajadores (El Centro) and the UCLA Labor Center. We employed the principles of "research justice" to center the diverse experiences of local meatpacking and food processing workers, in conjunction with broad industry analysis to better understand the structural characteristics shaping working conditions, hiring practices, and health and safety outcomes.[53] Our findings draw from the direct testimonial of 47 food processing workers in Los Angeles County, as well as an extensive literature review and supporting analysis of relevant policy and government data. Primary qualitative data was gathered through a series of focus groups and interviews with workers and industry experts.

In November 2023, we held a worker engagement session, where more than 20 workers had the opportunity to share their experience in this industry. The event was centered around a "ground-truthing" exercise, where we presented workers with our preliminary findings on the temporary staffing industry and local composition of agencies. Participating workers then gave us feedback on which aspects of this research most resonated with their experience, including direct attestation given by prominent local agencies and the food processing companies they contract with.

Between March and May 2024, we designed and conducted four focus groups with meatpacking and food processing workers. These focus groups were conducted in Spanish, and led by organizers from El Centro, who recruited participants based on prior knowledge of the workers current employment and experience. Each focus group had between four and six participants who answered questions addressing their current employment, including their experience being hired through staffing agencies, their relationship with management, and day-to-day working conditions.

In June 2024, following the focus groups, seven additional worker interviews were conducted to delve further into a number of issues we identified as especially salient:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Workers who had experienced extensive wage theft |
| 2 | Workers in non-managerial "lead" positions |
| 3 | Workers who were first hired as minors |
| 4 | Workers in poultry processing facilities |

Additionally, we conducted one interview with a non-managerial employee of a staffing agency to learn more about business practices and the relationship between agencies and contracted employers.

The focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Members of the research team analyzed these transcripts for themes, inductively developing and iterating a thematic codebook to identify emergent patterns and representative excerpts. Focus groups and interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. Workers only participated in one format, and each participant

received a $100 gift card as compensation for their time. A number of experts were also consulted to provide additional context for our analysis and recommendations, including attorneys from the Department of Labor and the California Department of Industrial Relations, as well as individuals with direct experience organizing campaigns aimed at reforming public procurement contracts in school districts across the country.[54]

## Workforce Profile

Figures and tables in this research report use data from the American Community Survey (ACS), an ongoing annual survey of American households by the U.S. Census Bureau. The ACS 5-year estimate (2019–2023) is pulled from IPUMS-USA extract, which harmonizes U.S. census microdata.[55]

## Variable Definitions

### Low Wages

We computed the hourly wage variable for the ACS following the steps outlined by the UC Berkeley Labor Center.[56] We calculated the median wage for full-time workers in California at $27.78, using the 2019–2023 ACS 5-year sample. Following the UC Berkeley Labor Center's methods, we define workers as low wage if they earn less than two-thirds of the full-time median wage.[57] For California, the cutoff is $18.52.

### Food Processing Workers

Broadly, the estimates for food processing workers included those who are employed in food processing sectors as identified below. While we acknowledge that there are additional sub-sectors within the broader Food Manufacturing sector as captured in the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), such as Animal Food Manufacturing (NAICS 3111), Grain and Oilseed Milling (NAICS 3112), Sugar and Confectionery Product Manufacturing (NAICS 3113), Dairy Product Manufacturing (NAICS 3115), and Other Food Manufacturing (NAICS 3119), they are beyond the scope of this report. Using the industry and occupation classification system in the ACS dataset, food processing workers are identified by the following NAICS codes:

- ✔ Fruit and Vegetable Preserving and Specialty Food Manufacturing, NAICS 3114
- ✔ Animal Slaughtering and Processing, NAICS 3116
- ✔ Bakeries and Tortilla Manufacturing, NAICS 3118 (except retail bakeries)
- ✔ Seafood and Other Miscellaneous Foods, n.e.c., NAICS 3117, 3119

→

Also, as we explained elsewhere in this report, we include workers in food processing occupations in the employment services industry (NAICS 5613) to approximate employment via temporary staffing agencies.

We also limit our definition of food processing workers to include only workers in production occupations, such as butchers and other meat, poultry, and fish processing workers, packaging and filling machine operators and tenders, and miscellaneous production workers, including equipment operators and tenders. Using the OCC variable in IPUMS, we filtered production occupations to include codes from 7700 to 8990. Some categories used in our qualitative data analysis did not align perfectly with those represented in existing quantitative datasets, especially relating to workers employed by temporary staffing firms or poultry processors. For example, while NAICS subcodes do allow for a distinction to be drawn between animal slaughtering and processing (3116) and poultry processing in particular (311615), there were not enough instances in the dataset for these subcodes to generate robust findings. Given the centrality of this distinction in our qualitative analysis, we specify in the report wherever appropriate whether findings are drawn from qualitative or quantitative data.

## Industry Analysis

The food production supply chain is opaque, often by design. This complicated our ability to map and analyze local employers using traditional methods. For example, the registered entity controlling a food processing facility where work was performed was often distinct from the worker's employer of record, in particular when workers were placed via staffing agency. Similarly, in poultry processing, most operations depend upon a multi-layered network of "straw" agencies that effectively insulates the workers from their employer. Throughout the course of this research, we discovered several methods for identifying discrete connections between these various types of employment entities, all of which ultimately work in tandem to determine wages, hours, and working conditions. Data was gathered and collated from a variety of public sources, including registered business agent data through the California Secretary of State, job postings, Google Maps, and food safety recall data.

Data compiled from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration helped to reveal more than 50 unique staffing agencies operating in the food processing industry in Los Angeles County. By correlating the employer of record (often a staffing agency) with the site of injury or violation (often a food processing facility), we were able to map contractual relationships between agencies and food processing companies.

Inspection and violation data was retrieved using the OSHA.gov database search for the following NAICS codes: 3111 (Animal Food Manufacturing), 3112 (Grain and Oilseed Milling), 3113 (Sugar and Confectionery Product Manufacturing), 3114 (Fruit and Vegetable Preserving and Specialty Food Manufacturing), 3115 (Dairy Product Manufacturing), 3116 (Animal Slaughtering and Processing), 3117 (Seafood Product Preparation and Packaging), 3118 (Bakeries and Tortilla Manufacturing), 3119 (Other Food Manufacturing).

# APPENDIX B: Profile of Food Processing Workers in Los Angeles County

The following tables present the demographic and economic characteristics of food processing workers in Los Angeles County, using microdata from the 2019–2023 American Community Survey (ACS) data.

**Figure 6: Gender**

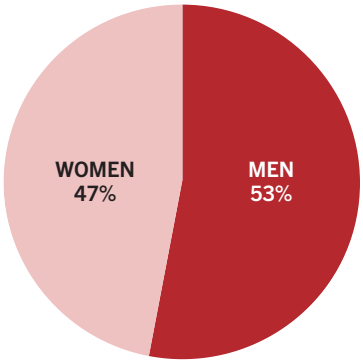



**Figure 7: Race/Ethnicity**

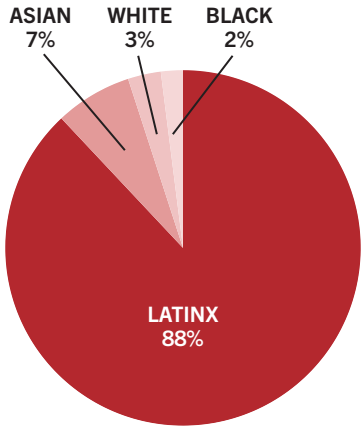



**Figure 8: Age**


**Figure 9: Education**

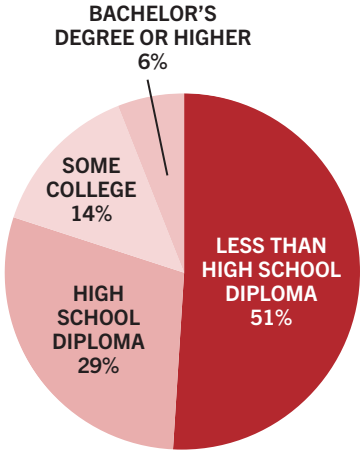
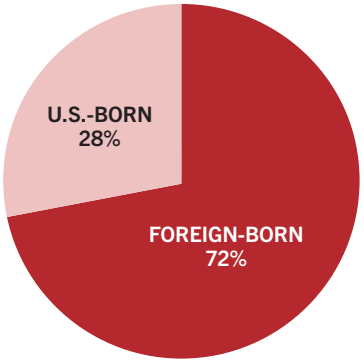
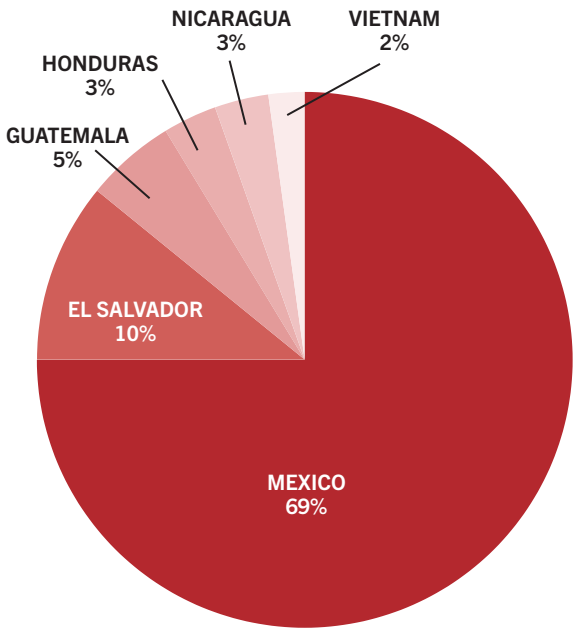


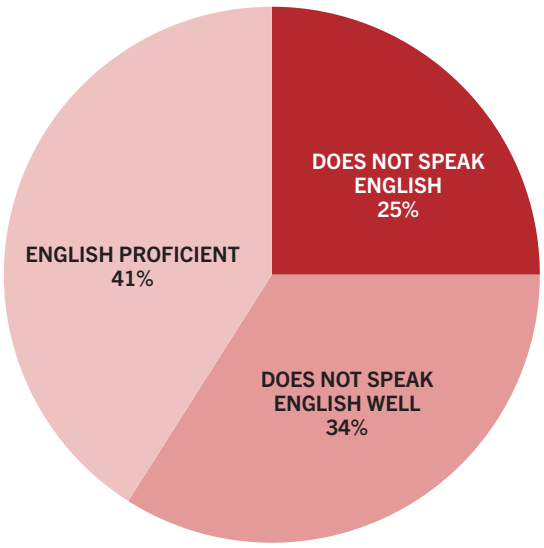

**Figure 10: Nativity**



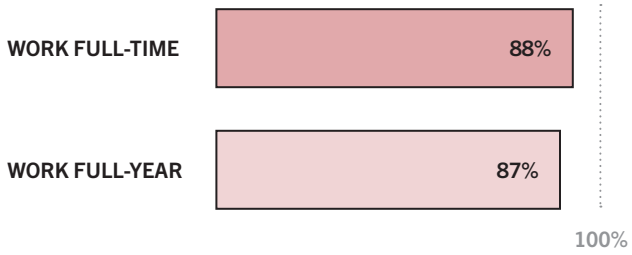
## Figure 11: Country



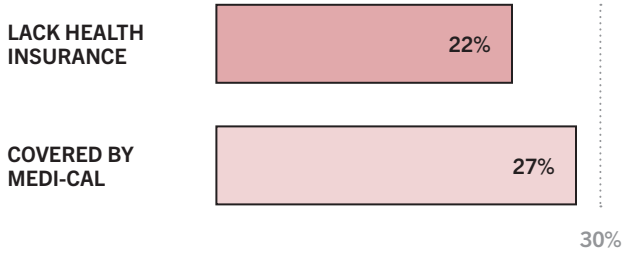

## Figure 12: English Proficency



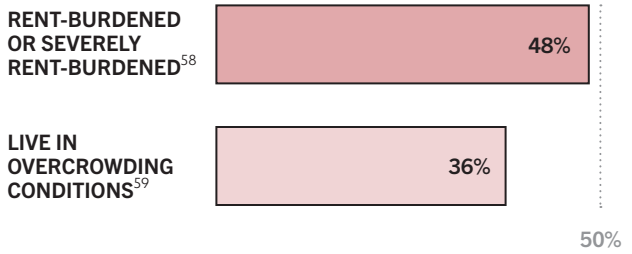

## Figure 13: Full-Time, Full-Year



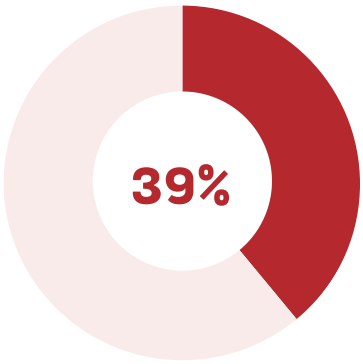

## Figure 14: Health Insurance




## Figure 15: Housing Conditions

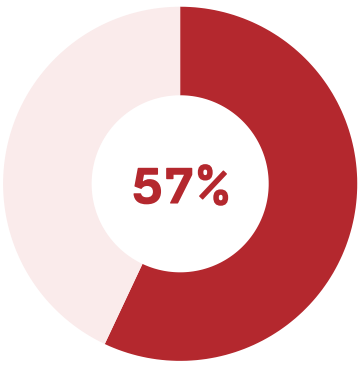


## Fig 16: Head of Household



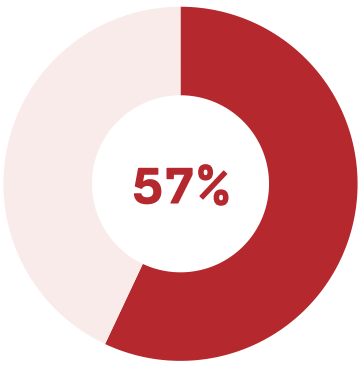

Are the head of their household

## Figure 17: Children



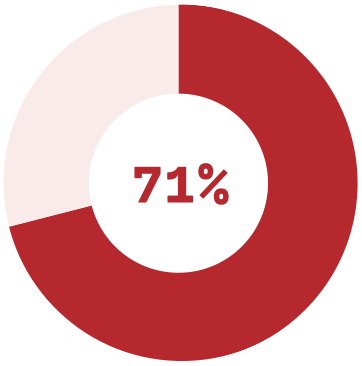

Support children

## Figure 18: Sole Earners




Are the sole earners in their family

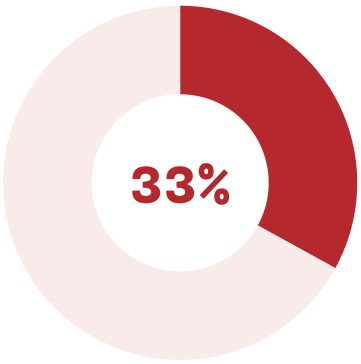
## Figure 19: Wages




Low wage

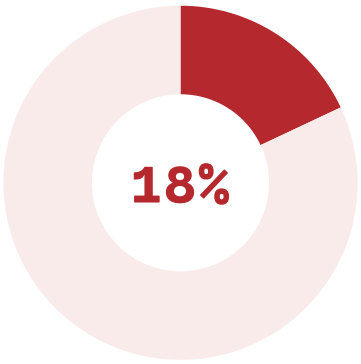
**$15.55**
Median Wage

## Figure 20: Poverty




Family income below 200% of the FPL

## Figure 21: Food Stamps




Receive food stamps

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# ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

## UCLA Labor Center

The UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and should advance quality education and employment for all. Every day we bring together workers, students, faculty, and policymakers to address the most critical issues facing working people today. Our research, education, and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth.

## Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy

Combining dynamic research, innovative public policy, and strategic organizing of broad alliances, LAANE promotes a new economic approach based on good jobs, thriving communities, and a healthy environment. For the past 25 years, LAANE has been at the forefront of Los Angeles' progressive movement, transforming conditions in key industries and improving the lives of hundreds of thousands of working families in southern California.

## El Centro

El Centro de Entrenamiento y Liderazgo Para Trabajadores organizes to build a society with just food systems, where all have access to ethically and sustainably produced food that does well by workers, is healthy and healing, and defends the interests and well-being of the next generation and the planet. El Centro believes that those who produce and consume food should be at the center of our food systems.

# ENDNOTES


1 Food processing, also known as food manufacturing, covers a broad array of sub-sectors involved in converting raw agricultural products and livestock into consumable food items. This industry includes various stages of production and packaging, such as meat and poultry processing, dairy product production, fruit and vegetable canning, grain milling, bakery operations, beverage manufacturing, and snack production. Within the broader food processing industry, Animal Slaughtering and Processing is the largest sub-sector based on sales, value added, and employment. It encompasses both meat and poultry processing, including the slaughtering of animals, the processing of meat into various products, and the preparation of poultry for distribution. While these sub-sectors tend to overlap in practice, in this report "meatpacking" specifically covers the handling and processing of beef, pork, and lamb, while "poultry processing" focuses on chicken and turkey.

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