

“NO SAFE PLACE”

Documenting the migration status and employment conditions of workers in Alberta’s meatpacking industry during the pandemic

MIGRANT DIGNITY PROJECT – REPORT TO COMMUNITY

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ActionDignity is a community-based organization that facilitates the collective voice of Calgary's ethno-cultural and racialized communities towards full civic participation and integration through collaborative action. <https://actiondignity.org/>



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THE CONDITIONS THAT MAKE MIGRANT & REFUGEE WORKERS VULNERABLE IN THE ALBERTA MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

PROVINCIAL LABOUR POLICY

- Designating meat packing as an “essential” industry
- Lack of Occupational Health and Safety oversight of industry

“I would like to highlight that the government, particularly Alberta Health Services, implemented poorly when it comes to controlling a big company like Cargill. Imagine: 900 people infected in two days. Those people have families. AHS can do a better job.”

FAILURE OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY SYSTEMS

- Internal Responsibility System
- Confusion about safety training
- Complex and hostile bureaucracies

CANADIAN IMMIGRATION POLICY

Refugees

2.5%
POPULATION OF ALBERTA

18%
WORKERS IN MEATPACKING

Temporary Foreign Workers

- Precarious legal status
- More likely to hide injury/illness
- Reluctant to voice concerns about safety

PATHS TO MEATPACKING

“I was willing to go anywhere. I just wanted to ... give a future to my only child”

IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

- Focus on employment
- Pipeline into meatpacking industry

3D JOB

- 1 DIRTY
- 2 DANGEROUS
- 3 DIFFICULT

“People will still stick around for this harsh and dangerous environment mainly to put food on the table for them and their family.”

RACISM IN THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET

Racialized workers over-represented in ‘essential’ industries

WORK CONDITIONS IN MEATPACKING

34%
INJURED AT WORK



42%
COVID-19 EXPOSURE



- Stress • Fatigue • Fear of Reprisal
- Compensation challenges • Rural & Remote Locations

Racialized Workers

21%
OF CANADIAN WORKFORCE

30%
OF WORKERS IN FOOD MANUFACTURING

“I didn’t change my work since I came to Canada. I feared from being jobless... that is why I preferred to stay in [meatpacking] and I was newcomer with a lot of commitments. I was thinking if I left this job I will only work as a housekeeper and I always used to work in decent jobs back home.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Industrial meat processing has long been recognized as a dangerous industry in which to work. These dangers became more pronounced with the onset of COVID-19: Across Canada and the United States, meat processing plants had to slow operations, and in some cases, shut down completely, to contend with massive outbreaks of the novel coronavirus among workers. The nature of this work – crowded industrial settings where workers often work side-by-side – led to massive COVID-19 outbreaks resulting in hundreds of workers becoming sick and numerous deaths.

The Province of Alberta has one of the largest meat processing sectors in Canada. According to industry reports, between 2018 and 2020, Alberta's slaughter and meat processing sector produced \$14 billion worth of goods and services, contributing \$4.9 billion dollars to the provincial GDP (Canfax Research Services, 2021). 70% of beef sold in Canada is manufactured at two plants in Southern Alberta: Cargill in High River and JBS Foods in Brooks. The meat processing industry, including these two plants, relies heavily on racialized, immigrant, migrant and refugee workers who make up a significant proportion of the workforce. An estimated 67% of workers in the Alberta meat processing industry are immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). When COVID-19 emerged as a serious threat to workers in this industry in March of 2020, it was these im/migrant and refugee workers who bore the brunt of the outbreaks, infection, and fatalities.

This report presents the findings from a community-university research partnership between researchers from the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University and the Calgary-based community organization, ActionDignity. Data for this report comes from a survey of 224 im/migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry and 17 qualitative interviews. The survey and interviews took place between January and May 2021. A team of multilingual researchers conducted first language interviews with 17 im/migrant and refugee workers who work in meat processing in Alberta. The interviews were transcribed and translated to English. The survey was available in five languages including English. The goal of this research project was to understand the conditions that produce vulnerability for im/migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry.

The key findings from this research are as follows:

- 1. COVID-19 presented an unprecedented and new risk to workers who already labour under difficult and dangerous conditions of work.** Research participants reported on the speed and scale of the outbreak at Cargill and JBS Foods and the chaos that attended these outbreaks. 42% of survey participants reported that they or someone in their household tested positive for COVID-19. 11 out of 17 interviewees also had COVID-19. Workers describe a haphazard and poorly communicated response to the initial outbreak and the need to take safety matters into their own hands, in the absence of leadership from their employers or the Provincial Government. Participants also described how efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have inadvertently worsened other conditions of work and exacerbated concerns around safety at work. The report provides a narrative account from the perspective of workers of the COVID-19 outbreaks at JBS Foods and Cargill.

- 2. Canada's temporary labour migration programs exacerbate the vulnerability facing migrant workers in meat processing.** Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) represent a relatively small percentage of workers in the Canadian meat processing industry, yet these workers experience heightened forms of vulnerability due to their temporary legal status in Canada. Our research indicates that workers who enter Canada through this migration pathway are reluctant to voice concerns about their work conditions due to fear of reprisal and/or job loss. This resonates with other research on Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program which suggests that migrant workers are more likely to hide injury or illness and less likely to speak out about dangerous work conditions due to their precarious legal status (Salami et al. 2018). While the TFWs we interviewed had previous work experience in the industry – and were recruited by their employer because of this experience – much of their initial settlement in Canada is managed by their employer and as such they are not given sufficient information about their rights in Canada, or the services available to them. This lack of information is exacerbated by geography as most live in the small and rural communities near their employer.

- 3. Refugees to Canada are over-represented in the Alberta meatpacking industry and are uniquely vulnerable to dangerous work conditions and risk of injury and illness.** Refugees make up approximately 2.5% of the population of Alberta yet represent 18% of workers in meatpacking in the province. Survey data from this project suggests that refugees are nearly twice as likely to be injured on the job compared with other categories of im/migrants. Refugee participants describe histories of moving between precarious and low paid jobs to end up in meatpacking, reflecting Canada's racialized and segmented labour market. Refugee participants describe conditions of work characterized by high levels of risk, stress, fatigue, and fear of being laid off.

- 4. Provincial occupational health and safety regimes meant to protect workers do not adequately meet the needs of im/migrant and refugee workers.** As in other provinces, Alberta's occupational health and safety (OHS) system relies on something called the "internal responsibility system." The central tenets of the system are the right to know through training and access to information on hazards, the right to participate in OHS at work, and the right to refuse dangerous work. The OHS system is complaint-driven and requires that workers assert their rights to workplace safety. This system disadvantages im/migrant workers who, as precarious workers in low-wage jobs, may be unable to assert their rights to workplace safety, lack clarity around how to exercise these rights, or fear reprisal for speaking out about unsafe work conditions. This was the case for participants of this study who describe a confusing and difficult to navigate system of disconnected bureaucracies that ultimately fail to protect workers. Most workers expressed high levels of distrust with respect to Alberta's Workers Compensation Bureau (WCB) and provincial regulatory oversight of the industry. This distrust was made worse by the failure of both the industry and the Province of Alberta to protect workers during the initial days of the COVID-19 outbreaks in March and April 2020.

5. **While COVID-19 represents an extreme example of the risks im/migrant and refugee workers face in the meatpacking industry, workers report conditions characterized by high levels of risk, high probability of injury, difficulty navigating support and fear of reprisal and/or job loss. Unless there is significant reform to the industry and regulatory environment in which it takes place, workers will continue to be vulnerable at work.** While the focus of our project was on the impact of COVID-19 on workers in the meatpacking industry, responses to the survey and participant interviews revealed a broad array of safety concerns related to working in this industry. These include high rates of injury, work related stress, fear of abuse and reprisal, a lack of basic safety training and uncompensated overtime or sick leave. While COVID-19 posed an unprecedented and frightening new risk to workers in meatpacking, it is clear from our data that workplace safety is a persistent challenge for migrant and refugee workers in this industry.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIORITIZING WORKER SAFETY IN THE MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

1. Ensure all workers in meatpacking are prioritized for vaccination, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other COVID-19 safety measures
2. Take a holistic view of workplace safety that includes risks of COVID-19 as well as other workplace hazards
3. Apply the precautionary principle when there is an impending and serious threat to health and safety of workers (e.g. early stage COVID-19).
4. Critical health and safety information, as well as employment contracts should be provided to workers in their first language
5. Enhance access to paid sick days for workers and ensure policies around sick days are clearly communicated to workers

ENSURING EQUITY IN CANADA'S IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

6. End the industry's reliance on the Canadian Temporary Foreign Worker Program. These jobs represent a permanent need in the labour market and as such should be filled by workers with Permanent Residence in Canada.
7. Ensure federally funded settlement agencies take a holistic view of settlement and integration programming beyond the focus on employment.
8. Prioritize rights-based training for newcomer workers through community supports (such as settlement agencies)
9. Build relationships between the immigrant and refugee settlement sector, community supports, and worker advocates (including union and the Workers Resource Centre)

STRENGTHENING OCCUPATION HEALTH AND SAFETY OVERSIGHT AND ENFORCEMENT

10. Designate COVID-19 as an occupational disease
11. Reverse Provincial anti-labour legislation such as Bill 32 ("restoring balance in Alberta's workplaces act") and Bill 47 ("ensuring safety and cutting red tape act")
12. Expand and sustain wrap-around community supports that have been developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Multi-lingual Emergency Response to COVID (MERC), to support migrant and refugee workers with workplace challenges.

THE PROJECT

Project background

Across Canada and the United States, it has become apparent that meat processing facilities are prime vectors for the transmission of COVID-19. The nature of the work – crowded industrial workplaces where workers often stand shoulder to shoulder on a processing line, make it difficult to prevent transmission. There is also evidence that the cooler temperatures inside meat plants are conducive to the spread of the disease (Pokora et al., 2021)

On April 20, 2020, the Cargill meat processing facility in High River, Alberta shut down operations for a period of two weeks. This unprecedented shut down was the result of a massive COVID-19 outbreak ultimately affecting some 1500 workers and responsible for the deaths of three people, including Hiep Bui, Benito Quesada and Armando Sallegue, the father of a worker (Blaze Baum, Tait & Grant, 2020). The Cargill outbreak was one of the largest COVID-19 outbreaks in North America and the largest in Canada (Dryden & Rieger, 2020).

That same month, the JBS Foods in Brooks, Alberta also reduced operations as it contended with a smaller (though still significant) COVID-19 outbreak. The JBS outbreak impacted 900 workers, one worker died in connection with the outbreak.

As news of the Cargill and JBS outbreaks came to public attention, it was clear that the workforce in the Alberta meatpacking industry is made up of workers who are predominantly im/migrant, refugee and/or racialized. While still in the early days of the pandemic, it was already clear that workers from immigrant and refugee communities were being hard hit by the pandemic. There is significant evidence that immigrant workers in Canada are concentrated in ‘essential’ industries such as long-term care, in factories and food processing, as taxi drivers and in transportation and as frontline health care workers and cleaners (Bouka & Bouka, 2020; Block & Dhunna 2020). Most of these workers earn little more than minimum wage and do not have access to paid sick leave or extended health benefits.

More recently, data from Statistics Canada reveals that immigrants to Canada were more likely to die of COVID-19 than non-immigrants in the first wave of the pandemic (March-July 2020). 25% of COVID-19 deaths occurred among immigrants, a group that makes up 22% of the total population. For those younger than 65, immigrants represent 20% of the total Canadian population but accounted for 30% of all COVID-19 deaths (Statistics Canada, 2021). The Statistics Canada report suggests that these deaths are, in part, attributable to the fact that “newly arrived immigrants live in low income or in overcrowded or multigeneration households. They are also more likely to be employed as essential workers in occupations that are associated with a greater risk of virus infection” (Statistics Canada, 2021, p. 1).

In response to the April 2020 outbreaks in High River and Brooks, community organizations, including ActionDignity, mobilized to support workers and their families. This support included calling most of the workers at Cargill to ensure their basic needs were being met and to find solutions to challenges they were facing including links to supports and services. ActionDignity also worked with partner organizations and groups to bring food hampers and medication to affected workers and their families.

While this immediate support proved essential, the need to understand the broader systems and policy landscape that led to the devastating outbreaks in Alberta's meatpacking industry and the impact on migrant and refugee workers became apparent. In June 2020, ActionDignity partnered with researchers from York University in Toronto to understand the root causes of worker vulnerability in the Alberta meatpacking industry. This report provides a summary of the findings from this community-university research project.

Project scope and methods

The central goal of this research is to understand and unpack the structural and policy conditions that produce the vulnerability that immigrant, migrant and refugee workers face in the Alberta meatpacking industry. While the COVID-19 outbreak presented an unprecedented threat to workers in the industry, meatpacking has a long history as inherently difficult and dangerous work (Horowitz, 2008; Stull, 2020; Stull & Broadway, 1995). For example, research from 2014 indicates that workers in meatpacking plants have the highest probability of a disabling injury of all manufacturing employees, at a rate that is more than double the manufacturing average (Charlesbois & Summan, 2014). Rather than seeing the COVID-19 outbreaks in Alberta meatpacking plants as isolated incidents, the research team sought to situate these outbreaks within the wider policy and systems frame that surrounds work in the meatpacking industry.

A central feature of this industry is its reliance on newcomer workers – both migrant workers who come to Canada through Temporary Foreign Worker Programs and other immigrant and refugee workers. According to data from the 2016 census, 67% of workers in meat product manufacturing in Alberta (NOC code 3116) are immigrants (a category that includes economic immigrants, refugees and immigrants who enter Canada through family reunification programs). While exact details on the number of Temporary Foreign Workers in meatpacking is difficult to ascertain, an industry cap only allows 10% of the workforce at a particular plant to be composed of TFWs (Government of Canada, 2019). Census data from 2016 indicates that 6.7% of workers in Alberta's meat processing industry are TFWs (Statistics Canada, 2016). In our survey, nearly 13% of respondents entered Canada through the TFWP. Given its reliance on these im/migrant and refugee workers, this project focuses on connecting Canada's immigration and refugee system to the meatpacking industry; seeking to understand the relationship between newcomer workers and the specific vulnerabilities they face at work.

Research methods

The findings from this report come from two sources: An online survey of 224 im/migrant and refugee workers in the Alberta meatpacking industry and qualitative interviews with these workers.

A multi-lingual team of community-based researchers recruited by ActionDignity supported this research which was led by Dr. Bronwyn Bragg and Dr. Jennifer Hyndman from York University. Interviews were all conducted in the participant's first language and then transcribed and translated to English. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all the interviews were completed remotely – either through an online platform such as zoom or by phone. Participants received a \$50 honorarium for participating in an interview. A list of interview participant characteristics is included in Appendix A.

224 people completed the online survey that was open between February and April 2021. 17 workers participated in a qualitative interview for this project. In order to participate in this project participants had to have been born outside of Canada, be 18 years of age or older and currently work in a meat processing facility in Alberta. Participants who completed the survey received a \$20 honorarium for their time. Survey responses have been compiled in a table that can be found in Appendix B.

Both the survey and interview guide were designed in collaboration with the research team to ensure questions would be easily understood by participants. The survey was available in five languages including English, Amharic, Tigrinya, Tagalog and Arabic. The survey was available online so participants could complete it easily on their smartphone or tablet. Because some participants have limited access to technology, community researchers would occasionally complete the survey with the participant over the phone.

Findings

THE FOLLOWING REPORT IS DIVIDED INTO FOUR SECTIONS:

1. COVID-19 outbreaks in meatpacking facilities from the perspective of migrant and refugee workers
2. Policy conditions that produce worker vulnerability (I): Canadian immigration and settlement policy
3. Policy conditions that produce worker vulnerability (II): Dangerous work and the failure of occupational health and safety systems
4. Policy recommendations

Section one (COVID-19 outbreaks) provides a narrative account of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreaks in the two largest meatpacking facilities in Alberta (Cargill and JBS foods). This narrative provides the foundation for the discussion that follows in sections two and three.

Section two (Canadian immigration policy) makes explicit the links between Canada's various temporary and permanent immigration programs and the vulnerability that 'newcomer' (migrant/refugee) workers face in the meatpacking industry. This discussion includes an examination of both the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and Canada's refugee resettlement programs to explore how these distinct programs shape the experiences of workers in meatpacking.

Section three (Dangerous work) provides an overview of the conditions of work facing migrant and refugee workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry. Here we explore how COVID-19 is but one of many risk factors that workers face in this industry. This section describes how workers understand their own experience of safety at work and the conditions they face. We also examine how workers understand and navigate the various systems that are meant to protect them, and what gaps exist in providing adequate protection to workers.

Section four (Policy recommendations) concludes the report by offering a series of policy recommendations based on the findings presented in this report.

SECTION I:

COVID-19 outbreaks in meatpacking facilities from the perspective of migrant and refugee workers

“Hearing about COVID, maybe in 2019. I heard about it on the news, that there was a virus that was spreading around China. Then it came to Canada in February or March. Then it became much worse as almost all of Cargill got infected. That was when there was a bit of mania with people. Panic started. What would we do then?” (07-GA)

“The first one to test positive in Cargill was in March. It was just hearsay. But of course people worry about it. Of course. Who would not worry? Especially when you see what’s happening the on the news, that people are dying due to COVID. But at the same time some did test positive at Cargill, it was like nothing happened. Everyone was too relaxed. Just in and out.” (07-GA)

Since March of 2020, COVID-19 has become a part of daily life in Canada. It is now difficult to imagine a time ‘before COVID.’ Like many people in Canada, the participants of this study reported first hearing about COVID on the news or from friends or family. They saw news reports on TV or had friends from back home post information on Facebook. In February and early March of 2020, COVID remained a distant and invisible threat. It was not clear to the people we interviewed if or how the virus might impact them.

It was in the weeks after March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, that workers in the meatpacking industry started to get worried. Rumours spread at work that some of their co-workers had tested positive for the virus. Looking back on this period of time, most participants reported that the information available to workers about the virus and its spread was lacking:

“I was just anxious about what we have to do or what protection we need. But there was also no one who would guide us on safety that we needed. We were told we only needed masks. But they wouldn’t give us masks anyway.” (07-GA)

There was also confusion about the Alberta Health Services pandemic guidelines and the Provincial Government’s response:

“At that time AHS direction wasn’t clear yet. There were no directions yet to isolate those with symptoms in hotels.” (MB-09)

Media reports in the year since the outbreak reveal that the first confirmed case of COVID-19 at Cargill was reported on April 6, 2020 (Appel, 2021). The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) – the union representing Cargill employees – reported the case to management and requested PPE for all employees, financial assistance for self-isolating workers and suggested closing the plant. On April 12, 250 Filipino residents of High River wrote a letter to the mayor asking for the plant to be shut down, expressing their fears that they might bring the virus home to their families (Dryden, 2020).

On April 18, after an Occupational Health and Safety inspection of the plant (conducted remotely), which concluded the plant was safe, Cargill held a telephone town hall with its employees informing them it was safe to return to work (Smith, 2020). Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH), and Minister of Agriculture Devin Dreeshan attended the townhall. Both officials emphasized the safety of the plant for workers. Correspondence between Dr. Hinshaw and the Minister's office have since revealed that the CMOH had been informed of COVID transmission within Cargill "after protective measures at the plant were put in place" (Rusnell & Russell, 2021) This information was not communicated to workers during the townhall, and instead workers were assured it was safe to return to work.

Two days later, Hiep Bui, a 67-year-old woman who had worked at Cargill for 23 years, died of COVID-19.

While anxiety and fear grew among workers, they were left without adequate information about how to protect themselves from the spread of COVID-19. One participant reported,

"The response from management during the pandemic was very slow at the beginning. The infection spread too fast and the whole shift was affected and we were all asked to go home. I felt the symptoms earlier and was still working. I told my supervisor and the nurse in the company that I feel some weird symptoms. But they were covering and denied that this might be something serious." (11-NO)

Another worker told us: ***"Cargill did not introduce the necessary precautions on time. It did not even provide us with basic PPE tools: mask, glove, sanitizer and face shield."*** (15-AS)

As COVID-19 spread rapidly through the plant, one participant described the situation as "chaos," he went on, ***"most of the employees [are] scared and no one want to work...The only way people got back to work is when the company started to give bonuses."*** (17-MY)

Information about the timing and nature of compensation for workers before, during and after the COVID outbreaks is difficult to confirm. Media reports from the time (cf. Blaze Baum, Tait, & Grant, 2020) reported that workers were offered bonuses to continue to come to work after COVID had been identified as a threat to workers but before the plant closed down. Several interview participants confirmed this, telling us that they received an additional \$2/hour and \$50/day as well as a one-time \$500 bonus to continue to come to work in the weeks and months leading up and following the closure of the plant.

Several workers reported taking safety measures into their own hands:

"Since my sister living in Calgary works at hospital, she briefed me further on details. Afterwards, I made extra care. Almost all my friends who work at Cargill fell sick with COVID. I also heard that my brother in Ethiopia also caught COVID. Thus, I drew lessons from others and made extra care which helped me escape COVID." (16-AS)

Another worker reported bringing his own PPE to work: ***"I knew that it is very contagious. I was very careful already. I wore a mask and brought my own sanitizer."*** (09-MB)

Of the 224 people who completed the survey, 42 percent indicated that themselves or someone in their household tested positive for COVID-19. 11 out of 17 interview participants also reported testing positive for COVID-19. Many reported being sick for several months. In addition to fearing for their own health, participants were deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the people they lived with, including their families.

“I was scared for my wife. Because her condition was extreme. Like what happened on TV...she was only at home. She does not want to be at the hospital because she does not have anyone to stay with her there...it was really difficult. We just prayed. What else would anyone do?” (07-GA)

Another worker had a family member who was living with him die of COVID-19. He told us that he was *“quite sure he got it [COVID] from me.”* Following the death of the family member, the worker was diagnosed with *“trauma, stress and flashbacks.”* He went on stress leave for eight weeks. He reported that he suffered from insomnia: *“I had flashbacks. I could not get over the fact of what just happened to him [the relative who died], my kids.” (09-MB)*

Another worker told us:

“I went through a very tough time and I was mentally affected as my three month daughter and wife catch the disease from me. I was thinking if they suffer or die, I will be the reason and I couldn’t tolerate that feeling. I also had very tough symptoms and I suffered a lot as well as my three months daughter.” (11-NO)

Some participants went to extraordinary lengths to protect members of their household from contracting the virus: *“I did not get my child swab tested because they only stayed at home after in-person school stopped. They didn’t go outside. I told my child not to go outside their room. They really worked hard in their room for many months. But sometimes they go upstairs. We all have the same washroom.” (07-GA)*

“One cousin who works at another Cargill department was sent home...because of fear they decided to wrap the room in plastic cellophane. There are plastic barriers all over the house to ensure no contamination.” (09-MB)

While most participants reported being very concerned about the risks to their family members or the people they lived with, others reported being isolated and having few supports:

“I tested positive and I was sick for almost a month. Since I live by myself, if I didn’t have the help I get from my community, I would have been in big trouble. I didn’t work for almost two months and it was tough financially and morally. Regarding family, I don’t have any family members in Canada.” (17-MY)

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created rifts in normalized day-in and day-out jobs for meatpackers. Whether these individuals had tested positive or not, they were often exposed to situations that put them under mandatory isolation struggling to make ends meet. Participants noted the lagging community support during the earlier periods of the pandemic.

“I didn’t get any help from the company or any kind of support from organizations during the first periods of the pandemic. You are only requested to seek help from the government and apply for the COVID-19 benefits... I was from the first people who are infected by the disease when it was new and people are terrified. The doctors [don’t] offer anything apart from saying, ‘good luck, I don’t have anything to give you for your symptoms’. The only thing was the individual support from one neighbor who used to buy us groceries and all the household items. I isolate myself of course and asked people to stay away from us and don’t visit until we finish isolation.” (11_NO)

“I didn’t receive help from the plant or any organization apart from some individual support from Sudanese friends. You were only asked to apply for the government benefit but no help from any local organization or from the company. During this period, I was also helping families to apply for the benefit and reporting for the EI.” (12_NO)

Scholarly articles have yet to examine the impact of chronic social isolation with respect to health and well-being. However, Rothman and colleagues highlight the correlation between isolation and stress (Rothman, Gunturu and Korenis, 2020). Additionally, isolation produces negative emotions of anxiety, fear, and irritability. The COVID-19 virus and social isolation challenges the mental well-being of the human population, but may have unique effects on marginalized and vulnerable populations, especially in meatpacking due to its physically demanding work conditions and physical distancing in facilities.

On April 20, Cargill shut down for a period of two weeks. At that point, 1500 workers had contracted COVID-19, along with an untold number of family members and people who lived with Cargill workers. Community organizations including ActionDignity partnered with primary care physicians in High River and Alberta Health Services to deliver supports to impacted workers and their families.

In Brooks, the JBS plant did not fully close but reduced operations from two to one shift per day. While the COVID outbreak at JBS was less severe than at Cargill, the impact was equally difficult for workers who struggled with similar fears over infection and spreading the virus to their family members. Workers reported a similar lack of action on the part of the company to communicate safety information and protect workers, one JBS worker told us that he believed that the outbreak at JBS was worse than was reported in the press at the time:

“In Brooks, they always hide the actual situation and I believe the number of infected people is way higher than what is reported as the official authorities and the news was covering. I feel like Brooks is a small colony where all the authorities and government section is working to support the plant management and they benefit from it.” (12-NO)

In both the interviews and survey responses, the majority of workers reported significant changes with respect to COVID-19 safety protocols at their workplaces. This included the addition of temperature checks at the entrance, masking and PPE protocols, and some physical distancing requirements (such as plastic barriers between workers). Despite these changes, workers remained skeptical about the ability of their employer to keep them safe from COVID-19. Workers identified several ongoing challenges related to workplace safety vis-à-vis COVID-19 including overcrowding in certain areas such as the locker rooms, washrooms and the cafeteria.

Similarly, participants also identified that there were unintended consequences to COVID safety measures. For example, physical barriers that were set up on the production line may have offered protection from COVID but may put workers at increased risk for other injuries:

“After the Cargill outbreak, there has been substantial changes. At the start of COVID, they test ran setting up a physical barrier. In the Fab [fabrication department], it is not easy to set up a fix barrier because there is a conveyor running all the time. A worker may be protected from COVID but not from injuries.” (O9-MB)

The plants also limited the number of people who took breaks at the same time to reduce overcrowding in the break areas, but several workers reported that the speed of the production line was not reduced, so workers had to continue to operate at full speed but with reduced labour power.

As information about COVID has evolved, some workers also expressed concerns about ventilation within the plants: ***“That’s worrying in the plant especially during wintertime. Probably now that spring is here, we have fresh air circulation, it seems safer. But then again, if it is airborne, even with air coming from outside, the virus will still go around through the ventilation.”*** (O9-MB)

Interviews for this project took place in March-June 2021, during which time several workers were off on quarantine because of ongoing outbreaks at meat processing facilities in Alberta. While none reached the scale of the 2020 outbreaks, it was clear that COVID remained a threat to workers in the industry.

Even with the enhanced safety protocols, most participants of this study reported a lack of trust vis-à-vis their employer, especially related to worker safety. Many reported feeling that the company put the profit and customer satisfaction ahead of worker safety both during COVID and at other moments during their time working for the company:

“Cargill was worried about the product and public image. They do not care about us [and] did not introduce the necessary precautions on time. It even did not provide us with basic PPE tools: We are extensively physically close to each other... Still Cargill’s safety protocol on COVID is very weak.” (15-AS)

Interviewer: *The issue is work may get disrupted right? There may be many disruptions.*

Participant: *It is due to their commitment to the customers that they would not commit to their employees.* (GA-07)

Participants were also asked about the response of the provincial government to handling the COVID outbreaks. Some workers reported that their personal interactions with Alberta Health Services (AHS) had been positive – for example, clear information about their diagnosis and the health precautions they needed to take going forward:

“I and my roommate were told by AHS that we need to get checked and we [were] diagnosed positive for COVID. They were also occasionally following me up via telephone if I had any symptoms or if I need help. I am thankful for the service I received from AHS.” (15-AS)

Other participants, however, noted that AHS had failed to contain the deadly spread of COVID at their workplace: *“I would like to highlight that the government, particularly AHS, implemented poorly when it comes to controlling a big company like Cargill. Imagine: 900 people infected in two days. Those people have families. AHS can do a better job.”* (15-AS)

SECTION II:

Policy conditions that produce worker vulnerability (I): Canadian immigration and settlement policy

This project focused on understanding the experiences of workers in the meatpacking industry who came to Canada as immigrants, refugees or Temporary Foreign Workers. According to data from the 2016 census, 67% of workers in meat product manufacturing in Alberta (NOC code 3116) are immigrants. 18% of these workers in the industry entered Canada as refugees (Statistics Canada, 2016). While exact details on the number of Temporary Foreign Workers in meatpacking is difficult to find, an industry cap only allows 10% of the workforce at a particular plant to be composed of TFWs. Census data from 2016 indicates 6.8% of workers in meat product manufacturing were Temporary Foreign Workers (Statistics Canada, 2016).ⁱ

This was confirmed in our survey data which found that 55% of survey respondents entered Canada through a refugee program; 25% through programs of family reunification; 13% through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and 5% through the skilled worker program. Within the refugee population 43% came to Canada as Government Assisted Refugees, 51% as Privately Sponsored Refugees and 6% came as refugee claimants.

Different legal status, similar experiences of vulnerability

Recent scholarship on the relationship between legal status, immigration policy and substantive rights points to the way that immigration status produces inequality: Legal status and the immigration pathway through which an im/migrant comes to a new country shapes their access to services, supports and their rights in their new country (Vertovec, 2007; Goldring & Landolt, 2012; Goldring, Bernstein & Bernhard, 2009).

Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program brings migrant workers to Canada on labour market-oriented temporary work permits, meant to gaps in the labour market. These migrants enter Canada without Canadian Permanent Residence and the benefits that accompany legal status, including access to settlement services or employment benefits should they become sick or injured.

Temporary migrant workers, whose right to remain in Canada is often tied to their employer, their employment position and work location, face what Strauss and McGrath describe as a form of labour “unfreedom” which makes them **highly vulnerable to abuse** and disincentives speaking up about their situation (Strauss & McGrath, 2016). Scholarship on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program as well as activist efforts have demonstrated how a lack of legal status in Canada exacerbates precarity and vulnerability for temporary migrants (Cedillo, Lippel & Nakache, 2019; Quinlan, 2015; Moyce & Schenker, 2018).

ⁱ According to the 2016 census data, the number of “non-permanent residents” working in NOC Code 3116 (meat product manufacturing) was 590 out of a total of 8,740 workers representing 6.7% of the workforce. This number, however, is largely seen as an undercount as the number of Temporary Foreign Workers (non-permanent residents) varies over time.

On the other hand, **resettled refugees – who make up a significant percentage of the workforce in meatpacking** – arrive in Canada with Permanent Residence status. This legal status confers benefits including access to settlement support, language training, and financial support for their first year in Canada. Yet our data suggests that there is a gap between the legal rights afforded resettled refugees through their legal status and their experiences in the Canadian labour market. Like their co-workers who lack formal legal status, the refugees who participated in this study **face significant barriers to accessing adequate workplace health and safety.**

Despite these significant and important differences in legal status, our data suggests that **im/migrant and refugee meat packers – regardless of their legal status – face similar conditions of vulnerability in relation to their work.** That is to say: While the policy regimes that surround each ‘category’ of migrant (temporary migrant worker or refugee) are distinct, both groups experience conditions of precarity and structural violence in the workplace and these conditions are inextricably linked to their respective positions as vulnerable ‘newcomer’ workers.

In the following sections, we describe the journeys of migrants who enter Canada through both the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and as resettled refugees. We demonstrate that both these systems produce specific forms of vulnerability that put workers at greater risk for violations of workplace safety.

Temporary Migrant Workers

Out of 224 respondents, 12.95% or 29 respondents arrived in Canada via streams in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) as Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) with only 3 respondents holding a current a work visa as a TFW. Notably, these findings are consistent with the current policies that mandate a strict 10% workforce cap to TFWs in meatpacking plants (FSPC, 2017; Government of Canada, 2019). Thus, TFWs can consist of around 100 per 1000 workers per facility.

Countries such as the Philippines offer clear pathways for skilled workers to enter Canada, usually under low-skilled contracts under the TFWP. While workers enter Canada on ‘low-skill’ (low-wage) contracts, many are skilled workers: The three TFWs interviewed for this project had previous experience and training in meat processing and two had university degrees in commerce and engineering.

Meatpacking companies send job postings to recruitment agencies in the Philippines who hold intensive interviews for applicants. Employers in Canada arrange housing, transportation from the airport upon arrival, a Social Insurance Number (SIN) and provincial healthcare for the workers. As we heard in interviews, **participants who come to Canada through the TFWP are geared to begin working as soon as one week from landing in Canada, with minimal on-site training.**

Interviewer: How about immigrant serving agencies in High River and Calgary. Are you familiar with them? How about the government services, did you receive any briefing about that before coming here?

Participant: There might have been something that they said during the briefing. But I do not remember anything. Because at the time we arrived here, right when we landed, we fixed everything right away. Our SIN, Alberta Health Card, and there was a small briefing. Right when we got off the airplane, and we haven't even settled in yet, everything was designed to gear us to work. So I do not remember any services that they described.

Interviewer: Who picked you up from the airport?

Participant: A liaison officer. Maybe from Cargill's HR.

Interviewer: How would you describe your settlement from your first month? Did you start working? How many days did it take you to settle before working?

Participant: Only 3 days. And after 3 days, we had a briefing at Cargill. After a one week briefing, or no maybe it was only a few days. But we headed straight to training as a butcher in production. (GA-07)

This experience was echoed by the other workers who came to Canada through this program: People who enter Canada through the **Temporary Foreign Worker Program** are not eligible for formal settlement support from government funded settlement agencies and thus **their 'settlement' experience is entirely managed by their employer** and/or informal social support from other workers.

The large meatpacking companies in Alberta have signed Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) with the United Foods and Commercial Workers union to outline support of international recruitment for labour shortages. CBAs are a mechanism through which the labour of temporary migrant workers is differentiated from other workers in the industry. Workers entering through the **TFWP are hired by their employer in their country of origin and brought directly to the town where they will be working** (such as High River, Alberta). According to our interviews with former TFWs, these workers were able to access Canadian Permanent Resident within a year or more of being in Canada as part of their arrangement with the employer. However, despite the promise of Canadian PR, **these workers remain highly precarious as the loss of their job often results in repatriation.**

As workers with previous experience in the industry, the TFWs we interviewed highlight their value to their employer as skilled workers who have many years of experience in the meatpacking industry:

The requirements have become stringent because there were reports about non credentialed butchers who were able get through system. We were able to comply with the new requirements. Out of 80 successful Cargill applicants, I was one of the 40 who passed the screening process and was issued a TFW visa. There were many factors for the denial of applications. I know of someone who failed the medical test. (08-MB)

Our survey data suggests that these workers experience lower rates of injury (21% of TFWs reported being injured at work, compared with 34% of all workers, and 37% of refugees) than their co-workers. We speculate this is because the current Temporary Foreign Worker Program prioritizes skilled workers with previous experience in meat processing. Despite this experience, like the other workers interviewed for this project, **TFWs faced undue hardships in the workplace and were reluctant to voice their concerns to safeguard their employment and migration status.**

For example, **all had experienced some degree of workplace injury** but were reluctant to file for Worker's Compensation for fear of being fired:

Participant: *Actually, here is what happens. Once someone gets COVID, or there is an issue that happens, the magic word of the management is "go home." Or "you can quit." Those types of sayings. Like "Why should I answer you?"*

Interviewer: *Is that their attitude towards the workers?*

Participant: *It becomes just a word of mouth. Because I have also been told to go home, but most is word of mouth. Mostly hearsay. I hear from other people, that they are being told these things from higher ups. What would they say? "Just quit if you don't want to work here." So that is why employees work so fast because many people apply as well. There are many people who are looking for jobs.*

Interviewer: *It has a fast turnover?*

Participant: *Yes. Truly so. They change people really fast. If you want to leave, just leave. (GA-07)*

Notably, both TFWs and refugee participants voice their need to provide for their families and fuels their perseverance through tough working conditions, **"I was willing to go anywhere. I just wanted to apply abroad and settle everything I need to with my family in the Philippines and give a future to my only child"** (GA_English2).

Resettled refugees

Literature on the meatpacking industry in Alberta documents the important role that resettled refugees have played in the evolution of the labour force in meatpacking (Broadway, 2013). JBS Foods (formerly Lakeside Packers) has a long history of employing workers who came to Canada as resettled refugees from countries including Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. The research team interviewed workers from these countries as well as refugees from Afghanistan. Literature on refugees in Alberta finds that while refugees tend to have stronger economic outcomes than refugees in other Canadian provinces (Hiebert, 2017), they also face challenges vis-à-vis housing and employment. Esses et al. (2013) found that 60.6 percent of refugees in Alberta are concentrated in jobs classified as low skilled (NOC code D). As we describe below, **many refugees reported challenges finding work in Canada and felt enormous financial pressure due to familial commitments both here and to family living overseas (often in refugee camps or precarious living situations).**

Data from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that the majority of workers who have been deemed “essential” – from grocery store clerks to warehouse workers, the personal service workers in nursing homes, the cleaners in hospitals, as well as those who produce much of the food in the Canadian food supply – are disproportionately racialized and have immigrant backgrounds (CCPA, 2020). This data is echoed in a devastating report by Statistics Canada that shows that **immigrants to Canada faced significantly higher levels of mortality from COVID-19** in 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021). This is what Block and Galabuzi (2011) have referred to as Canada’s ‘colour-coded labour market’ where racialized people, including immigrants to Canada, are over-represented in low paying, precarious work.

In Alberta, the meat processing industry relies disproportionately on im/migrant and refugee labour. While refugees make up just under 3% of population of Alberta, they make up 18% of the workforce in meat processing (Statistics Canada, 2016). **Our data suggests that a confluence of factors lead refugees to employment in this industry:**

- ▶ **The necessity of earning an income to support family members both here and abroad**
- ▶ **Significant structural barriers in the labour market that lead refugee workers to move between precarious and low paying jobs with minimal job security or benefits, ultimately ending up in meatpacking**
- ▶ **Language and literacy barriers that make meat processing a viable employment opportunity for some refugees**
- ▶ **A large pre-existing workforce made up of other refugees from similar countries who assist newcomers in finding employment**
- ▶ **Relationships between the large meatpacking facilities and Government funded settlement agencies that encourage newcomers to seek employment in the industry**

When we trace the history of employment for refugee workers in the meatpacking, there is a pattern that emerges: Upon arrival in Canada, refugees struggle to find work and often move between low-paid and precarious jobs.

I worked in a bedding factory for a short period was covering someone. Another time I worked in Ottawa, Ontario. I was housekeeping at the University for five months. When I was new to Canada. Sorry, I also worked factory in Edmonton for three months. They were looking for extra employees for the holidays before Christmas. When their employees came back to work they fired me. They said we do not have the position for you. (01-DJ)

I worked in some places like SAIT, The Bay, restaurants and at a bakery but I did not work for long time in these places. In these jobs, I worked only for one, two or maximum six months. In most of these places the workload was way bigger than what they were paying me. When I found out about the job opening in Cargill I applied for it. (03-Fauzia)

While work in meatpacking is understood to be difficult and dangerous, participants also reported that it pays better than other work that was available to them and they were often able to secure employment despite language barriers or a lack of Canadian work experience:

For the first 6 months, I was looking for a job, but no one trusted me and accepted me to work for them as I was not speaking English. (04-Fauzia)

One of our relatives, who is no more with us, brought me the application and I applied for it. Cargill called me and I went there with my son for an interview. They told me that this job was not easy as one could be easily injured or develop chronic pain and discomfort in their body due to hard conditions, physical work, and cold temperature at work area. I accepted all the conditions and started working there. (05-Fauzia)

Thus, our sponsor facilitated my application to Cargill. He advised me that it was comparatively an attractive job. It was hard to get casual job for \$13 fee per hour (as at Cargill) through Calgary. By then, I assumed full responsibility of taking care of the entire family until others get job. Besides, I was helping my mom and brothers in Ethiopia. (14-AS)

Unlike migrants to Canada who enter through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, resettled refugees have the ability to change employers and seek different or more preferable employment. Despite this de jure right, we observe that few refugee workers feel they have the power to change their employment situation, despite experiencing hardship, injury and/or work-related stress. Throughout our interviews and survey responses, workers expressed that they felt trapped in their job:

“People will still stick around for this harsh and dangerous environment mainly to put food on the table for them and their family.” (Qual Survey)

“I’ve talked to them yet but everyone is afraid of being fired. You can understand people are suffering. Especially as Somalis, we are people who help their people back home support. We don’t take a mortgage, or car the only thing we think about is people back home who are in distress, drought, explosion, daily fighting, and fighting that we send money.” (01_DJ)

Most of the workers are highly qualified especially within Sudanese community. I did some statistics and there were about 20 medical doctors in JBS. Those doctors face the some challenges as refugees and newcomers and some of them tried to take the exams with no success that is why they end up working in JBS. Some of the workers are master’s degree holders and they just afraid of changes and losing the job with all the commitments they have and the challenges as newcomers. People who are qualified they are not confident enough that they will find better jobs and they might become unemployed, that is why they prefer to keep their job (12-NO)

I didn’t change my work since I came to Canada. I feared from being jobless and changing my position, that is why I preferred to stay in JBS and I was newcomer with a lot of commitments. I was thinking if I left this job I will only work as a housekeeper and I always used to work in decent jobs back home. (11-NO)

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their fears of loss of income or termination due to health concerns for their family.

“The first response by the plant [to COVID-19] is that they stopped the senior workers and the pregnant women for a while. There was no any compensation or any kind of incentives in JBS.” (NO Interview 3)

The average age of survey participants is 41 years old, leading some to feel that they are disposable workers due to their injury-prone age. Workers believe they are vulnerable to being fired as they believe many younger workers are ready to take their positions.

“They are capable of replacing ten people. These people may be much younger and stronger. They could drop us at any time. Us older workers could get injured because we have been working here for so long.” (GA interview 2)

We note that despite the perception on the part of workers that they are easily replaced, the meatpacking industry holds some of the largest turnover rates across any industry and identifies recruitment and retention of workers as the primary challenge facing the industry (FSPC, 2019). That workers feel replaceable and fear losing their job is disconnected from their actual situation in relation to their employer, yet belies the gross power imbalance that exists within the industry between management and workers.

SECTION III:

Policy conditions that produce worker vulnerability (II): Dangerous work and the failure of occupational health and safety systems

“There is no safe place in this plant” (Survey response ref 20)

While the focus of our project was on the impact of COVID-19 on workers in the meatpacking industry, responses to the survey and participant interviews revealed a broad array of safety concerns related to working in this industry. These include high rates of injury, work related stress, fear of abuse and reprisal, a lack of basic safety training and uncompensated overtime or sick leave. While COVID-19 posed an unprecedented and frightening new risk to workers in meatpacking, it is clear from our data that workplace safety is a persistent challenge for migrant and refugee workers in this industry.

Injury

Current data on the Canadian meatpacking industry reveals that workers in this industry experience high rates of injury. This was confirmed in our survey data that found that 34% of respondents reported being injured at work. These injuries are summarized in a Table 1 below. The most common injuries were hand, shoulder and back injuries. Even workers with extensive experience in the industry reported repetitive strain injuries or damage to their hands or shoulders. Other workers reported disabling injuries such as falls that resulted in being unable to walk, injuries that required major surgery and chronic back pain.

TABLE 1: INJURY TYPE AND FREQUENCY

Type of Injury	Number of times reported
Hand	
Wrist	1
Finger	12
General hand	14

Total hand	27
Arm	
General arm	2
Elbow	1
Total arm	3

Shoulder	
General shoulder	18
Rotator cuff	1
Total shoulder	19

Head	
Eye	2
Forehead	1
Total head	3

Back	
General back	5
Lower back	2
Total back	7

Leg	
General leg	2
Knee	4
Total leg	6

Other	5
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Training

Interview participants were asked about the amount of safety training they received at work. Training is often cited as a crucial component of occupational health and safety and a necessary intervention for protecting workers, especially in an industrial work environment. Based on our interviews, there appear to be significant gaps in safety training for workers. Participant responses varied considerably when asked about the amount and quality of training they received. While some workers felt the training was adequate and met their needs, others reported that they had received very little or no training at all:

Interviewer: *What type of training have you ever taken relevant to your career?*

Respondent: *Just nothing! I have never taken any upgrading training at Cargill. If you assign for new position, you have to learn by observing from your coworkers. (15-AS).*

The last thing is my concern about the job training. It is really a big issue and very risky for the workers. We were asked to watch people while they are doing their jobs without real training and if you don't get it they don't bother and it is easier to fire you as they always give the feeling that they don't care if you go many others need your position. (11-NO)

Workers reported that if they changed jobs within the plant there was not adequate training and they were required to learn by observing their co-workers:

After my training, they put me in an area where there is heavy big meat. I worked there for seven months I got used to it after that they have moved where I just left now which is smaller meat. I did not get training in the second place they moved me. I was watching co-worker how they do it and they were telling my piece. That's how it is. (01-DJ)

Participants also noted that there are significant challenges with respect to on-the-job training. One worker shared that they were not being able to understand the technical jargon in the training they received and requests for clarification were met with derision from their supervisor:

I used to read the technical terms without adequately comprehending details. I used to ask the supervisor every morning. Nevertheless, she used to turn down my inquiry and with resentment she used to ask me: Aren't you reading the instruction? Why do you then ask me? I used to respond; yes, I can read but could not comprehend the technical jargons. Why wouldn't you help me? (14-AS)

Several workers reported that they did not feel safe to ask questions during the training for fear of being fired:

Even in that forklift training, many candidates who could not cope instantly due to initial confusion were not tolerated. There was little tolerance to enable beginners in that training. (14-AS)

Work conditions

In addition to injury, workers reported significant challenges related to their daily work conditions. Meatpacking has long been identified as a **3D job: Dirty, dangerous and difficult**. This was confirmed through interviews and survey responses with workers in the industry.

Workers reported severe exhaustion, fatigue and stress resulting from their work. One interview participant explained the reason he did not seek treatment for a persistent injury was because when he got home from work: *“you would rather sleep than eat”* (07-GA). Workers reported that a typical workday involved an 8-hour shift with two 20-minute breaks and one 30-minute break for lunch. Workers described the challenge of remaining on their feet for the full workday, completing repetitive tasks or tasks that required heavy lifting:

Interviewer: *Have you ever been injured at work? Or do you have chronic health/injury issues that are related to the work you do?*

Participant: *At the beginning of my work at Cargill, I was working with knife and I was working very hard and gradually I found that two of my fingers had become stiff and locked and would not move. I contacted my supervisor and he then referred me to Cargill doctor. I had a surgery for my fingers and I was compensated and covered by WCB. The doctor told me to stop working at knife section and my job was changed. I was working at a section where I had to constantly and rapidly lift the heavy packages of cow hip. After some time, I felt some mild pain in my navel area and gradually this pain increased, and the painful area started to swell. Cargill right away booked an appointment for me and I had a procedure done and got some stitches in that area. The surgeon told me to stay home for a month to heal and recover. I was compensated by my blue cross insurance. Also, my right hand from time to time gets swollen and this is also related to my work.*

In addition to fatigue and exhaustion, some workers reported experiencing extreme stress from their work environment.

The end of last month, I lost consciousness due to the stress and a lot of anger. They took me to the nurse office kept me there for awhile, they thought I had Covid-19 but I told them that am under a lot of stress, the nurse called people who in charge they move me easier place when I came back the next day the supervisor was upset told me why did you listen to them so I was scared to get fired went back on the same place. I'm extremely stressed and do not know what to do. (Survey ref 15)

Sometimes this stress was caused by conditions workers described as abusive. Some participants described abusive supervisors or experiencing bullying and/or harassment at work. Several survey respondents described having requests for bathroom breaks ignored or delayed. Many participants described problems with compensation.

The company put me a lot of pressure specially my supervisor for the last four months, she picks on me changes my line, I am given five minute for washroom use if I am late for one minute she comes and yells on my ear and the meat is piled up on my line because of this pressure I almost went under big truck due to this stress. I'm about to lose my mind if I know where else to get job I would have quit long time ago. Some time I see my paystub money is missing but I let it go because they will tell you go to the union sign paper and I don't have time for this. Why they say Canada is free and fair country when new immigrant and refugees being treated like this and they look the other way? (Survey response 16)

There is a policy about using washroom, example the union told us if you request washroom and no one comes to release you go ahead use the washroom but some people do not understand that so they wait and wait when no one shows up they urinate while standing and handling the meat, the place is very cold, they are handling food and their clothes is wet even the workers is not safe wearing wet clothes in that condition let a long handling food. The supervisors are aware but they do not care as long as the job is done (Survey response Ref 17)

These feelings were exacerbated by the sense that workers had few other employment options and were therefore trapped in their current position:

You go home and cry ask yourself, 'should I quit?' And then, 'where will I get a job?' The next day you go to work do same thing all over again. (Survey response Ref 17)

Workers felt vulnerable to being fired for reporting injuries, asking questions during training, or speaking up about difficult work conditions.

I noticed most workers get injured at JBS and afraid to come forward because of losing their job. Right know there is a guy who injured his hand can't even make straight is working and hiding his injury.

The supervisor pressure the employees and give us job we can't complete due [to] less staffing. When I was new to the job there was a co-worker and I had issues we went to the supervisor and since then the supervisor as soon as he sees me starts giving me a problem. It is very stressful situation. Since Feb 2021 I did request sick leave still my hands and knees are hurting with pain. I have not get paid any sick leave or anything pay even if you are fulltime permanent staff. When you are at JBS you feel that your rights is violated. You can't go home as long as there is unfinish job which is everyday, even when your shift is over you stay maybe 9 hrs and you will get paid 8 hours this happens every pay cheque, when you complain they will fire you. You are basically slave to this company.

Their status as migrant and/or refugee workers exacerbates this sense of precarity, as many reported feeling that their English language ability hampered their ability to find other work.

Worker perspectives on navigating OHS systems

The public health emergency caused by COVID-19 has brought to light the fundamental challenges of securing equitable occupational health and safety (OHS) for vulnerable (migrant and immigrant) workers. The coronavirus has drastically deepened the risks for these essential workers. As in other provinces, Alberta's OHS system relies on something called the *"internal responsibility system."* The central tenets of the system are the right to know through training and access to information on hazards, the right to participate in OHS at work, and the right to refuse dangerous work. According to the Alberta Government, workers also *"have a responsibility to work safely and ensure the safety of themselves and others"* (Government of Alberta, 2020). In sum, the OHS system is complaint-driven and requires that workers assert their rights to workplace safety. **This system disadvantages immigrant workers who, as precarious workers in low-wage jobs, may be unable to assert their rights to workplace safety, lack clarity around how to exercise these rights, or fear reprisal for speaking out about unsafe work conditions** (Lewchuk, 2013; Lewchuk, Clarke & De Wolff, 2009).

Tracing the relationship between Occupational Health and Safety and newcomer workers who are both temporary and permanent residents is challenged by the fact that the organization responsible for tracking workplace injury and death does not collect data related to immigration status (Barnetson & Matsunaga-Turnbull, 2018). This data gap creates a knowledge gap regarding the specific challenges facing newcomer workers vis-à-vis workplace health and safety. The limited research that exists suggests that not all workers are equally able to 'voice' concerns about access safety in the workplace (Lewchuk, 2013); this can be especially challenging for Temporary Foreign Workers (Cedillo, Lippel & Nakache, 2019; Quinlan, 2015; Moyce & Schenker, 2018; Sargeant & Tucker, 2009).

The themes in the literature on occupational health and safety and newcomer workers are reflected in the data collected by the research team. Workers disclosed significant concerns about their safety at work related both to COVID-19 and to general occupational health and safety concerns working in industrial meat production.

From the perspective of the participants in this study, there are a number of barriers to accessing equitable occupational health and safety while at work. These include personal histories of being let down by the systems that are supposed to ensure their protections. Specifically, workers described having claims rejected by the Workers Compensation Board (WCB) or knowing of such rejection among their coworkers:

I really can't decide if the WCB is independent body or it is working for the company because they always support the company's decisions against the workers. There is collusion between the WCB and the company management. (11_NO)

Yes. We could not imagine because the other people we work with, they applied for WCB, they received a letter saying that they could claim \$1500 or \$2000 worth of money. But they did not receive anything from the WCB. (07_GA)

I have complained to the WCB and the WCB works with the managements for their own good and doesn't really care about worker's rights. I had a lot of issues with WCB and the union and I fought with the them because I was also helping other workers who couldn't fight for their rights. They were never fair with the workers and it always end up in a unsatisfying settlement between the worker and the company management. (12_NO)

Participants also expressed distrust vis-à-vis the provincial and federal governments based on the sense that these levels of government often 'take the side' of their employer over the safety of workers. The COVID-19 outbreaks at Cargill and JBS were illustrative of this: Many workers felt the provincial government sought to protect the needs of the industry over worker protection:

What the government should have done is, once the worst has happened, there should be action. They need action... If the government cannot stop the company because they are the "backbone" of the economy, they should at least support the workers. They need to fix this, so that we may operate efficiently. That is what they should do. (06_GA).

Several participants described examples of what they believed was a lack of oversight by the Provincial Government into the operations of their plant. For example, two interview participants and several survey respondents suggested that the plant would slow down the production line on days when there were government inspections of the plant:

I would like to highlight that the Government of Alberta and AHS were not too serious in following through what was happening actually. Every time their inspectors come, they often call the company. Knowing when they would show up, they company would often adjust the workstation to appear and pretend like the workstation is in line with the public health expectations. Often enough the machine speed would be slowed, and it appears as though it is a relaxed work environment. When the inspectors leave, all of sudden things change, the machine gets super exceeded and we would be placed in a high stress and close proximity workstation. (15_AS)

Second thing is that when I start working at JBS they told us that we kill 1750 and today number increased to 2400 each shift they don't put it in writing. We are still 2 people or 4 regardless how much they increase the staff does not change, the speed of the machine is vey fast, you can't even change your gloves or scratch you ear. However, when the government is coming for inspections, they start cleaning, reducing the speed of the machines all levels put everywhere signs, gloves and write low number then what we actually kill for each day. We believe that there is no government in Brooks because of what these types of company are doing and getting away with. (16_AS)

Other participants described experiencing injury or hardship at work but not knowing where to turn for assistance. One worker who came to Canada as a Temporary Foreign Worker described how he relied on the people he lived with for information about services, supports and recourse in the event of an injury:

Participant: *No, but I just don't remember because they might have mentioned something about it in the beginning. Because you don't really hear anything directly from Cargill, based on my five years. You only hear things from people in your house.*

The same participant described being overwhelmed by the systems that surrounded him – WCB, the union, Cargill human resources, and the private benefit system – he asked: ***“Who are the reliable resources we can ask the truth?”*** (07-GA).

This echoed sentiments from other workers who found the various complex systems that surrounded them overwhelming to navigate, especially given a shared understanding among many workers that these systems rarely offered adequate protection or support in the event of an injury. For example, the worker who contracted COVID at work and then passed it to a family member who subsequently died of COVID was denied stress leave by the company’s private health insurance and ended up taking an unpaid leave instead:

The Union encouraged me to file a complaint because they believed that my stress leave should be covered by the WCB. It was declined. We appealed. They used my doctor’s statement which stated that my stress was due to the loss of my dad, not due to COVID. Had the doctor’s statement been specific that it was stress due to COVID, I could have been compensated. I decided not to pursue it though. (09_MB)

SECTION IV:

Policy Recommendations

“... unless the nature of line work in meat and poultry plants changes significantly, coronavirus will continue to be a serious problem for workers, their families and the communities where they live.” (Donald D. Stull, 2020 p. 9)

As we have described in this report, while COVID-19 presented an unprecedented new risk to workers in Alberta’s meatpacking industry, there are a number of health and safety concerns related to the nature of this work that need to be addressed to protect the wellbeing of those who work in meatpacking.

The conditions in the Alberta meatpacking industry that pre-dated March 2020 made the industry vulnerable to massive outbreaks of coronavirus that made international headlines that spring. Addressing these underlying conditions is the only way forward to protecting workers both from COVID-19 and the daily hazards they face at work.

Below we present a series of policy recommendations aimed at improving the conditions of work for workers in Alberta’s meatpacking industry.

PRIORITIZING WORKER SAFETY IN THE MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

- 1. Ensure all workers in meatpacking are prioritized for vaccination, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other COVID-19 safety measures:**
 - a. As workers in an industry designated as ‘essential,’ workers in the meatpacking industry should be prioritized for vaccinations, COVID-specific PPE and other protections from COVID-19 as best practice in this area evolves.

- 2. Take a holistic view of workplace safety that includes risks of COVID-19 as well as other workplace hazards**
 - a. Workers should not have to choose between being protected from COVID-19 and being protected from safety hazards. For example, staggering worker breaks to prevent overcrowding may be an effective mitigation strategy to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 but if the line does not slow down to accommodate fewer workers on the line, workers are at increased risk of other injuries.
 - b. Meatpacking facilities need to take seriously the threat of airborne viral spread through improvements to ventilation, plant layout, worker scheduling, break areas and entrances and exits

3. Apply the precautionary principle when there is an impending and serious threat to health and safety of workers (e.g. early stage COVID-19).

- a. The precautionary principle refers to a proactive approach to mitigating risk “in the face of serious and irreversible threats” and when there is significant scientific uncertainty (Crosby & Crosby, 2020). The principle refers to the idea that when a threat is severe, “intervention may be considered legitimate, even where the supporting evidence is incomplete or speculative and the economic costs are high.” While the precautionary principle originated in environmental law, but has been applied in the public health context, including in relation to the SARS outbreak in Ontario (Bourguignon, 2015; Crosby & Crosby, 2020).
- b. The health and safety of employees is the top priority in situations where there may be a real or perceived health concerns and when in the face of scientific uncertainty. When workers are asked to put themselves at risk of infection in a workplace, this principle dictates we err on the side of caution to protect public health. Personal Protective Equipment like face masks, gowns and gloves should be provided.

4. Critical health and safety information, as well as employment contracts should be provided to workers in their first language

- a. Given the reliance on immigrant, refugee and migrant workers, the meatpacking industry and union should ensure that all relevant safety, health, and other information is provided to workers in their first language, including translation of employment contracts.

5. Enhance access to paid sick days for meat processing workers and ensure that policies related to sick days are effectively communicated to workers.

ENSURING EQUITY IN CANADA'S IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

6. End the industry's reliance on Temporary Foreign Workers:

- a. Given the perpetual labour shortage in the industry, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program should not be used to recruit international labour. These jobs represent a permanent need in the labour market and, as such, international workers should be offered Permanent Residence upon arrival.

7. Ensure federally funded settlement agencies take a holistic view of settlement and integration programming beyond the focus on employment.

- a. Consider the need to equip newcomer workers with the appropriate safety training etc. to protect them on the job

8. Prioritize rights-based training for newcomer workers through community supports (such as settlement agencies)

- a. Settlement services, but especially those programs that work with more vulnerable newcomers (for example, resettled refugees with language and literacy barriers) should prioritize rights-based training related to Occupational Health and Safety.

9. Build relationships between the immigrant and refugee settlement sector, community supports, and worker advocates (including union and Workers Resource Centre)

- a. While there are clear relationships between employers in the meatpacking industry and the immigrant and refugee settlement sector, the settlement sector should also develop relationships with worker advocates including the Alberta Workers Centre and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union to ensure greater culturally/linguistically appropriate supports for workers are available

STRENGTHENING OCCUPATION HEALTH AND SAFETY OVERSIGHT AND ENFORCEMENT

10. Designate COVID-19 as an occupational disease

- a. Update the Occupational Disease Table (List) under WC Regulations [Schedule B and Section 20 of the Alberta Workmen's Compensation (WC) Regulation] to include COVID-19 as an occupational disease. Large workplaces like meatpacking plants, are communities themselves (albeit, not geographically) where many people spend long hours each day and congregate. Workers that are deemed essential by the government cannot do their jobs from home unlike others. Designating COVID-19 as an occupational disease acknowledges that transmission takes place in these workplaces. The legal aspect of occupational diseases entitles workers to compensation which is recognized by Alberta Workmen's Compensation Act.

11. Reverse anti-labour legislation such as Bill 32 ("restoring balance in Alberta's workplaces act") and Bill 47 ("ensuring safety and cutting red tape act")

- a. Bill 32 changes the Labour Relations Code and Employment Standards Code in ways that adversely impact unions and workers and favour employers.
- b. Bill 47 implemented major changes to the Workers Compensation Board, including the elimination of an employer's legal obligation to rehire and accommodate an injured worker. It also ends an employer's obligation to continue paying extended healthcare benefits to an injured worker on WCB.
- c. Re-open the Fair Practices Office – this office served as an ombudsperson for the WCB and helped both workers and employers navigate the system. This office was particularly important for workers who face barriers in the workplace (such as language or literacy challenges). The office was closed as part of the changes brought forth under Bill 47.

12. Expand and sustain wrap-around community supports that have been developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Multi-lingual Emergency Response to COVID (MERC), to support migrant and refugee workers with workplace challenges

- a. Culturally informed, linguistically appropriate support could offer referrals to relevant services, advocates and medical professionals, systems navigation (such as WCB), and ensuring basic needs are met.

Appendix A:

Demographic Characteristics (interview participants)

Participant Number	Employer	Gender	Immigration Stream	Immigration Status	Language	Country of Origin	Had COVID-19
1	JBS	Female	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Somali	Somalia	No
2	Harmony beef	Female	Refugee	Canadian Citizen	Somali	Somalia	Yes
3	Cargill	Female	Family Sponsorship	Permanent Resident	Dari	Afghanistan	Yes
4	Cargill	Male	Family Sponsorship	Canadian Citizen	Dari	Afghanistan	Yes
5	Cargill	Male	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Dari	Afghanistan	No
6	Cargill	Male	Temporary Foreign Worker Program	Permanent Resident	Tagalog	Philippines	Yes
7	Cargill	Male	Temporary Foreign Worker Program	Permanent Resident	Tagalog	Philippines	Yes
8	Cargill Case Ready	Male	Skilled Worker Program	N/A	Illongo	Philippines	No
9	Cargill	Male	Temporary Foreign Worker Program	Permanent Resident	Cebuano	Philippines	Yes
10	JBS	Male	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Arabic	Sudan	No
11	JBS	Male	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Arabic	Sudan	Yes
12	JBS	Male	Refugee	Canadian Citizen	Arabic	Sudan	Yes
13	Cargill Case Ready	Male	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Tigrinya	Eritrea	No
14	Cargill	Male	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Amharic	Ethiopia	Yes
15	Cargill	Male	Refugee	Permanent Resident	Amharic	Ethiopia	Yes
16	Cargill	Male	Refugee	Canadian Citizen	Amharic	Ethiopia	Yes
17	Cargill	Male	Refugee	Canadian Citizen	Tigrinya	Eritrea	Yes

Appendix B:

Summary of survey responses (N=224)

Age	
Average age	41 years

Gender	
Man	70.09%
Woman	29.91%
Transgender	0
Other/prefer to not say	0

Country of origin	
Philippines	24.11%
Somalia	22.77%
Eritrea	16.96%
Ethiopia	10.27%
Sudan	9.38%
South Sudan	7.59%
Colombia	2.68%
Afghanistan	1.79%
Cuba	0.89%
Other	3.57%

Length of time in Canada	
1-5 years	28.57%
6-10 years	33.04%
11-15 years	17.41%
16-20 years	12.50%
21-25 years	4.46%
26-30 years	1.79%
30+ years	2.23%

Employer	
Cargill, High River	29.91%
Cargill Case Ready, Calgary	5.80%
JBS Foods in Calgary	52.91%
Other	9.38%

Length of time with employer	
Less than 1 year	12.95%
1-2 years	13.84%
2-3 years	9.38%
3-4 years	11.16%
4-5 years	7.59%
5 + years	45.09%

Immigration program	
Refugees	54.90%
- Government assisted refugees	43.10%
- Privately sponsored refugees	50.40%
- Refugee claimants	5.70%
Program of family reunification	25%
Economic immigration programs	5.40%
Temporary Foreign Worker Program	13%
Other	1.80%

Current legal status	
Canadian citizen	34.40%
Permanent resident	63.40%
Work/other visa	1.30%
Implied status	0.45%
Other	0.45%

Self-reported English language ability [1 weakest, 5 strongest]	
Reading (mean)	3.14
Writing (mean)	2.89
Speaking (mean)	3.17
Listening (mean)	3.29

Languages spoken at home	
Amharic	13.80%
Arabic	6.19%
English	22.30%
Oromo	3.10%
Persian (Farsi)	1.30%
Spanish	4.48%
Tagalog	18.80%
Tigrinya	17.40%
Vietnamese	0.34%
Dinka	3.79%
Somali	25%
Other	4.50%

Do you have children?	
Yes	71.88%
No	28.13%

How many children do you have?	
1	24.22%
2	42.86%
3	8.70%
4	10.56%
5	6.82%

6	1.86%
7	3.11%
8	0.62%
9 or more	1.24%
Average number of children	3.61

Do you children live in Canada?

Yes, they all live in Canada	83.14%
No, they live in another country	15.12%
Other	1.74%

Who is in your household?

I live with family	66.07%
I live with roommates	29.91%
Other	4.02%

Have you ever been injured at work?

Yes	33.48%
No	66.52%

Has anyone in your household tested positive for COVID-19

Yes	41.52%
No	56.70%
Don't know	1.79%

Are you able to maintain two meters of distance from your co-workers at work?

Yes	65.63%
No	27.23%
Other	7.14%

Perceived work safety [1 not safe at all, 7 very safe]

Mean	4.33
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