

## THE CRUELEST CUTS

*Last of Six Parts*



THE HUMAN COST OF  
BRINGING POULTRY  
TO YOUR TABLE

# WORKPLACE INSPECTIONS AT 15-YEAR LOW

OSHA eases poultry companies' penalties

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Poultry processors face few consequences when they ignore hazards that can kill and injure workers.

Weak enforcement, minimal fines and dwindling inspections have allowed companies to operate largely unchecked. An Observer investigation found:

- Workplace safety inspections at poultry plants have dropped to their lowest point in 15 years. The industry has kept steady employment over that time and has leaned heavily on illegal immigrants to fill jobs.
- Fines for serious violations – including conditions that could cause deaths and disabling injuries – are usually cut by more than half, to an average of about \$1,100.
- It has been a decade since OSHA fined a poultry processor for hazards likely to cause carpal tunnel syndrome, tendinitis and other musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) that are common to the industry.
- The federal government has made it easier for companies to hide those MSDs. Regulators in 2002 stopped requiring companies to identify injuries as-

sociated with repetitive trauma.

Officials with the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration say poultry plants are safer than ever, pointing to a decade of declining rates of reported injuries. They credit enforcement programs and a growing recognition among industry leaders that reducing injuries is good for business.

But the Observer found that the official injury statistics aren't accurate and that the industry is more dangerous than its reports to regulators suggest. Current and former OSHA officials say the agency has made it easier for companies to hide injuries, and has all but abandoned its mission to protect workers.

It's happening at a time when poultry workers are particularly vulnerable. Unlike some other manufacturers, which have largely automated their plants, poultry processors still depend heavily on manual labor to cut and package meat. Most line workers are immigrants, and many are afraid to complain about injuries for fear of being fired or deported.

"It's really a national tragedy that OSHA is so invisible, so silent these days," said Dr. Michael

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### ONLINE EXTRAS

[www.charlotte.com/poultry](http://www.charlotte.com/poultry)

- See a video about N.C.'s largest workplace disaster, which killed 25 workers in Hamlet in 1991 and increased scrutiny of companies – though not for long.
- Read the series. See what life is like on the poultry line and hear workers talk about their pain.