

RESEARCH STUDIES ON DAY LABORERS

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While day laborers have been a significant factor in the American economy for a long time, economists, politicians, and the academic community have largely ignored their impact. Recently however, a few reports and studies have been published about the plight of day laborers. The following synopses represent a comprehensive compilation of the most prominent research reports to date on day laborers.

Day Laborers in Southern California: Preliminary Findings from the Day Labor Survey, Abel Valenzuela, Jr., Ph.D, Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, Institute for Social Science Research, University of California, Los Angeles, Research funded by the Ford Foundation, (May 30, 1999). This report analyzes data collected during a random survey of 481 day laborers at 87 work sites throughout the Los Angeles area. The survey concludes that day laborers are predominately Latino, almost exclusively male, and have been in this country for either less than one year or more than ten years. About 40 percent of day laborers believe that their immigration status is current. Day laborers have a variety of education levels ranging from no formal education to college or professionally educated. The mean number of education years is seven, however more than one-third of day laborers have more than nine years of formal education. The average wage for day laborers is about two dollars more than the federal minimum wage. Day labor does not necessarily lead to permanent employment as one in four have been in this market for more than six years. About two in five day laborers claim that their immigration status is their main impediment to fulltime employment, while others blame language barriers, discrimination, and transportation. Homeowner and private subcontractors each account for more than forty percent of all employment opportunities. About half of all day laborers have reported instances of not being paid for work. Also, many workers complain about not being paid the agreed upon wage, receiving bad checks from employers, receiving no breaks during the day, getting robbed or threatened, and falling victim to other abuses at work. Ninety-four percent of day laborers are not homeless. Average incomes for day laborers vary wildly, usually between \$350 and \$1,000 per month. In 1998, day laborers sent an average of \$2,639 back to their home country.

Working on the Margins: Immigrant Day Labor Characteristics and Prospects for Employment, Abel Valenzuela Jr., Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, Working Paper No. 22 (May, 2000). This report uses the same data used in Valenzuela's previous report, *Day Laborers in Southern California: Preliminary Findings from the Day Labor Survey* (random survey in 1999 of 481 day laborers at 87 work sites throughout the Los Angeles). In Southern California in the late 1990s, there were an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 day laborers. Of

the day laborers surveyed, 1.5 percent were born in the U.S., 77.5 percent in Mexico, 20.1 percent in Central America, and 1.1 percent were born in other places. As of the time of the survey, 29.4 percent had been in the U.S. for less than one year, 22.9 percent for one to five years, 24.4 percent for six-ten years, 13.4 percent for 11-20 years, and 10 percent for 20 years or more. While 4.2 percent of day laborers have more than 13 years of education (meaning college or other professional schooling), 56.6 of day laborers have six years of education or less. Day laborers earn an average of \$8,489 per year or \$6.91 per hour of work.

***A Fair Day's Pay?: Homeless Day Laborers in Chicago*, Nikolas Theodore, Center for Urban Economic Development, University of Illinois at Chicago, Research funded by the Woods Fund of Chicago, (February 22, 2000).** This study contains the findings of a survey of 510 homeless men and women from Chicago in 1999. Seventy-five percent of homeless adults worked as day laborers in the past year. Eighty-two percent of homeless day laborers were paid an hourly wage of \$5.50 or less at their last job. Day laborers earned less than \$9,000 per year. Twenty-seven percent had worked, at least on occasion, for the City of Chicago. Forty-two percent of homeless day laborers expressed anxiety about their safety at their work sites. Finally, 96 percent of the day laborers would rather have permanent jobs than have to rely on day labor positions.

***Occupational Health and Latino Migrant Day Laborers: A Preliminary Exploration*, Paula Worby, Institute for Labor and Employment (ILE), ILE Conference, University of California (January 2002).** This report is about how health and safety concerns often take a back seat to wages for the day laborers. Oftentimes, in fact, day laborers will accept extremely dangerous jobs if the compensation is good enough (\$20 an hour). Among the other dangerous jobs accepted, some day laborers are hired to do the stripping of lead paint on a house or do the roofing of a house in the rain. More than one-half of all day laborers surveyed felt as though they have been abused, by either not being paid or being subjected to "cruel and unusual punishment." Almost without exception, when workers are injured at their work sites, their employers give them little or no help in paying for the necessary health care. Obviously, this is an advantage to the employers in that they do not have to pay into a workers' compensation fund for temporary workers.

***Social Context of Work Injury Among Undocumented Day Laborers in San Francisco*, Nicholas Walter, MS, Philippe Bourgois, Ph.D, H. Margarita Loinaz, MD, Dean Schillinger, MD, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, March 2002, Vol. 17 Issue 3.** This report analyzes data collected from 38 Mexican and Central American male day laborers, 11 of whom had been injured. The researchers find that anxiety over the potential for work injury is omnipresent for day laborers. They work in dangerous settings, and a variety of factors such as lack of training, inadequate safety equipment, and economic pressures further increase their risk for work injury. The day laborers are isolated from family and community support, living in a local context of homelessness, competition, and violence. Injuries tend to have severe emotional, social, and economic ramifications. Day laborers frequently perceive injury as a personal failure that threatens their masculinity and their status as patriarch of the family. Their shame and

disappointment at failing to fulfill culturally defined masculine responsibilities leads to intense personal stress and can break family bonds. Despite the high incidence of work injuries and prevalence of work-related health conditions, day laborers are frequently reluctant to use health services due to anxiety regarding immigration status, communication barriers, and economic pressure.

***Contingent Chicago: Restructuring the Spaces of Temporary Labor*, Jamie Peck, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Nik Theodore, Centre for Urban Economic Development, University of Illinois at Chicago, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, September 2001, Vol. 25 Issue 3.** This study finds that hiring-halls, specializing in the placement of day laborers in temporary jobs, have in recent years been proliferating along major transport arteries in Chicago's low-income neighborhoods. The study examines the phenomenon of low-wage temporary work in Chicago from the perspective of the principal institutional actors in these highly 'flexibilized' or 'contingent' labor markets – the 'temp' agencies. Particular emphasis is placed on the labor-market effects of temp-agency strategies, both in respect to patterns of labor segmentation and in terms of the spatial (re)constitution of urban job markets. It is suggested that temp agencies are actively engaged in both the exploitation and facilitation of contingent labor-market conditions. In this sense, they are assuming important new roles as privatized 'labor-market intermediaries', with apparently deleterious effects for job-security and social segregation in the lower reaches of urban labor markets. Their strategies can also be related to the social and geographic restructuring of these job markets, because the growth and polarization of temp employment has been associated with a 'hardening'-and indeed 'stretching'- of extant ethnic, gender and spatial inequalities.