

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-337](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

DOL is responsible for gathering data on workplace injuries and illnesses, including those in the meat and poultry industry, where workers may experience injuries and illnesses such as sprains, cuts, burns, amputations, repetitive motion injuries, and skin disorders. GAO was asked to examine developments since its 2005 report, which found this industry was one of the most hazardous in the United States and that DOL data on worker injuries and illnesses may not be accurate, and recommended that DOL improve its data collection.

This report (1) describes what is known about injuries, illnesses, and hazards in the meat and poultry industry since GAO last reported, and (2) examines DOL's challenges gathering injury and illness data in this industry. GAO analyzed DOL data from 2004 through 2015, including injury and illness data through 2013, the most recent data available, and examined academic and government studies and evaluations on injuries and illnesses. GAO interviewed DOL and other federal officials, worker advocates, industry officials, and workers, and visited six meat and poultry plants selected for a mix of species and states. The information gathered in these visits is not generalizable to all plants or workers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that DOL improve its data on musculoskeletal disorders and sanitation workers in the meat and poultry industry. DOL, USDA, and CDC concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-337](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov, or Steve Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morriss@gao.gov.

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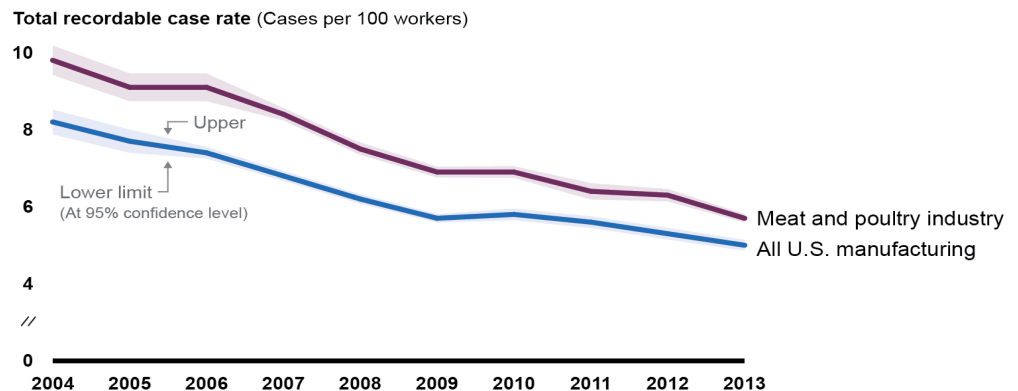
WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH

Additional Data Needed to Address Continued Hazards in the Meat and Poultry Industry

What GAO Found

Injury and illness rates in the meat and poultry slaughtering and processing industry declined from 2004 through 2013, similar to rates in all U.S. manufacturing, according to Department of Labor (DOL) data (see figure), yet hazardous conditions remain. The rates declined from an estimated 9.8 cases per 100 full-time workers in 2004 to 5.7 in 2013. However, these rates continued to be higher than rates for manufacturing overall. Meat workers sustained a higher estimated rate of injuries and illnesses than poultry workers, according to DOL data. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) evaluations and academic studies have found that workers continue to face the hazardous conditions GAO cited in 2005, including tasks associated with musculoskeletal disorders, exposure to chemicals and pathogens, and traumatic injuries from machines and tools.

Injury and Illness Rates among Workers in the Meat and Poultry Industry, Compared with Rates in All U.S. Manufacturing, Calendar Years 2004 through 2013



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics injury and illness data. | GAO-16-337

Note: The meat and poultry industry refers to the animal slaughtering and processing industry, North American Industry Classification System code 31161, which includes animal (except poultry) slaughtering, meat processed from carcasses, rendering and meat byproduct processing, and poultry processing including slaughter.

DOL faces challenges gathering data on injury and illness rates for meat and poultry workers because of underreporting and inadequate data collection. For example, workers may underreport injuries and illnesses because they fear losing their jobs, and employers may underreport because of concerns about potential costs. Another data gathering challenge is that DOL only collects detailed data for those injuries and illnesses that result in a worker having to take days away from work. These detailed data do not include injuries and illnesses such as musculoskeletal disorders that result in a worker being placed on work restriction or transferred to another job. Further, DOL does not have complete injury and illness data on meat and poultry sanitation workers because they may not be classified in the meat and poultry industry if they work for contractors. Federal internal control standards require agencies to track data to help them make decisions and meet their goals. These limitations in DOL's data collection raise questions about whether the federal government is doing all it can to collect the data it needs to support worker protection and workplace safety.