

Chicago Community and Workers' Rights: An Intervention to Precarious Work in Little Village

Journie Raulston, University of Illinois at Chicago

Jeni Hebert-Beirne, UIC Center for Healthy Work, University of Illinois at Chicago

Background

As work environments in the United States shift from standard to non-standard forms of employment, precarious employment becomes increasingly abundant.

Individuals who experience precarious work are subject to:

- unstable employment
- lower wages
- **more** dangerous working conditions
- **rarely receive** social benefits

Although they have the right to unionize, workers are scared to organize if they know they are easily replaceable.

Women, minorities, and migrant workers are much more likely to fill these kinds of jobs.

South Lawndale, also known as Little Village, is one of Chicago's 77 community areas with a population that is about 88% Latino and 39% foreign born

Residents of Little Village face high amounts of precarious and exploitative work in their community.

Chicago Community and Workers' Rights (CCWR) is a worker center:

- A community-based and community-led organization
- Engages in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing
- Provides support to low-wage workers throughout the Chicagoland area.

Purpose

To investigate the utilization of workers centers in a community that experiences high amounts of precarious work, and to understand how these participants' psychological and physical health are impacted as a result of this use.

Methods

Qualitative case study ; One-on-one interviews.

Each interviewee was asked these four questions:

1. What is your experience with precarious work?
2. When did you realize it was necessary to take action?
3. How did you work with CCWR to resolve this issue?
4. How do you perceive your overall health has been impacted as a result CCWR?

Strengths of CCWR

- Fully Spanish speaking to serve Little Village residents
- Serves as the only worker center located in Little Village
- Provides education about rights and legal methods
- Acts in solidarity
- Far reaching- utilized by 6-7 thousand people a year;
 - Participants from Berwyn, Cicero, Indiana, Wisconsin, Aurora, Joliet, etc...



Findings

Wage Theft

Eva experienced wage theft as a hotel housekeeper:

- Everyday, she had to tend to three times the normal amount of rooms in the same amount of time.
- The repetition of having to lift heavy bed sheets and cleaning supplies all day caused her to experience pain in her arms and back.
- Even during breaks, she was told to tend to a room with urgency and without the fulfillment of the rest of the break

Eva wanted to take action when:

- She couldn't hold a conversation with her children without falling asleep from exhaustion.
- She was awarded employee of the month to manipulate her into settling for poor working conditions.

As a result of utilizing CCWR:

- She is able to be more conscious and proactive about her diet
- Has more time to sleep
- Has more time to spend with her family

Occupational Injury

Virgilio experienced occupational injury at his job at an airplane assembly factory:

- Virgilio was badly injured after an airplane tire that weighed more than 800 pounds fell onto him one day at work
- Four years after the accident, he still experiences loss of motion in his hand and arm, and a spinal injury.

Leo experienced occupational injury at her job at a clothing factory:

- She developed carpal tunnel
- she could barely brush her teeth or get dressed in the morning.

Virgilio and Leo wanted to take action when:

- Virgilio and the other workers were experiencing physical abuse from supervisors.
- They noticed Virgilio's mental health declining

As a result of utilizing CCWR:

- Virgilio is working to collect worker compensation
- He was provided with a job at CCWR
- They feel they have more power to control their situations at work

Conclusion

Precarious work is normalized in Little Village and other marginalized communities, and workers are afraid of the consequences of advocating for themselves.

Anger is a powerful tool to motivate people to take action to advocate for their rights .

CCWR relies on referrals from other participants to raise awareness about their organization. They are able to support workers in Little Village by providing solidarity, and education about rights and legal proceedings at any level of educational attainment

As a result of CCWR, workers' health improved significantly; participants feel they have more control over their lives and as a result, they are able to be more conscious and proactive about their diet, have more time for sleep, and have more time to spend with their families.

Limitations

- Interviews were conducted in Spanish, so there were some translational barriers
- Participants for this study were dependent on those available to CCWR, so more themes would be explored given more time to contact participants
- These are sensitive topics that can cause people pain when recalling details, so there may be some recall bias.

Recommendations

While a well intentioned policy can be an effective tool in shifting the culture of a community, the implementation and enforcement of a policy is a much larger indicator of its effectiveness. This suggests that:

- There should be more severe consequences for employers who violate existing occupational policies
- There should be more resources and organizations, like Chicago Community and Workers Rights, that uplift marginalized communities to advocate for their rights.

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