

# Rampant safety hazards, wage theft on Nashville construction sites

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Construction has always been a dangerous job, but it has never been more dangerous in large southern US cities like Nashville, Tennessee.

In a survey of 1,435 construction workers in six major southern cities, Nashville ranked number one in frequency of injuries, almost double the average of construction related injuries in Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami and Charlotte, North Carolina in 2016.

The injury rate reported by the 200 Nashville construction workers was one in four compared to the one in seven average for the entire survey, which is published in a new report entitled “Build a Better South: Construction Working Conditions in the US South.” The study was conducted by the Workers Defense Project (Proyecto Defensa Laboral), Partnership for Working Families and Urban Planning, and Policy Collage of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Construction of high-rise apartment buildings has been quite common in Nashville over the past few years. At one point one could count 12 giant 19-ton, 150-foot high “Tower” cranes in and near the Nashville downtown area at a time.

Residential development has also demanded more construction workers. Older, one-story, wood frame houses in working-class neighborhoods have given way to gentrification and expensive narrow townhouse/row house-style homes.

Older neighborhoods seem to disappear overnight in the city. The threat of a housing bubble seems to mean nothing to bankers and builders caught up in fevered construction anarchy, with each hoping to be the one with the last loan paid off or the last home built and sold before the bubble bursts.

“These cities are the engines of growth in the South and are home to some of the largest and most important

construction markets in the US,” the survey stated. “Nearly 1 million construction workers were employed in these six cities in 2013, accounting for 43% of all construction workers employed in the five states. Furthermore, more than one in four construction workers who are employed in the South are located in one of these six cities, and nationally one in 10 workers labor these six southern cities.”

An increasing number of construction workers are undocumented immigrants who are subjected to even greater frequencies of wage theft and other exploitation by employers who exploit their fear of arrest and deportation. Thirty-two percent of respondents in Build a Better South reported that they lacked legal documentation to work in the US.

Builders and contractors will turn to temporary employment agencies to keep down costs while the “temp” companies feed off the workers’ need for a job.

Injured economically by their employment status, temporary workers also run a higher risk of being injured on the job. The survey showed that workers hired through temporary employment agencies suffered a high injury rate that could be traced to “constantly changing work environments and poor access to training.”

Again, Nashville topped the list, with 18 percent of workers reporting that they got their jobs through temporary “staffing” companies.

One worker said temporary jobs added insult to injury because it seldom led to a full-time position. “Many times, you’ll get close to a permanent job and you get switched out or they don’t hire you,” he told reporters.

Nashville workers may suffer greater injuries because more than one-third are not provided most proper safety equipment. According to the survey 36 percent of the workers are not provided eyewear protection; 36

percent have no harness or fall protection, with nearly the same rate for those without hardhats (32 percent) or gloves (29 percent).

“Working or living in these new buildings, or gazing at their beautiful facades, you can no longer sense the presence of those construction workers and the challenges they faced, toiling long, hard hours to support their families,” David Michaels, PHD with the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, said in the forward to the report.

“The evidence of pervasive wage theft, and of widespread employment misclassification, disappears once the buildings are finished and the crews go home,” Michaels added. “There is no more blood on the rebar where workers fell, and no signs of the back injuries that came from lifting too heavy loads or the gasping for air that comes from breathing silica dust day after day...

“The outrage is that dangerous, unjust employment occurs in plain sight, in our downtowns and suburban malls and office parks, abetted by owners and builders who participate in this system without complaint...We can no longer be silent knowing that our homes and commercial centers, our universities and hospitals, are built by men and women who work long hours but who can barely feed their families, who face dangerous working conditions daily with no recourse or compensation if they are injured, and whose labor rights are too often violated.”

The survey listed a litany of crimes against this group of workers:

- \* Just 5 percent of workers who were injured in the past 12 months had workers’ compensation insurance to cover their medical expenses.

- \* Workers may not even receive the most basic safety protections like rest breaks or access to drinking water. One-third of workers do not have drinking water provided on their worksite, a basic necessity that employers are required to provide under federal law.

- \* Few construction workers have access to basic employment benefits. Less than half (43 percent) of construction workers are offered medical insurance by their employer. The problem of access to medical insurance is exacerbated by the fact that only 45 percent have an employer that has workers’

compensation insurance.

- \* Approximately three out of four workers lack paid personal time (73 percent) or paid sick time (78 percent). More than half (57 percent) of workers surveyed earn less than \$15 per hour despite high average levels of experience in the industry.

- \* One in seven workers has been injured during their construction career, and more than one in three of these workers have suffered an injury in the past 12 months.

- \*Thirty-six percent of workers struggle to pay for basic necessities, such as rent or food, even though 82 percent of workers reported working overtime with their current employer.

In 2015, based on US Department of Labor statistics, a construction worker died every nine hours for a total of 924 that year, the report noted.

The Department of Labor also reported that in 2015 several construction occupations recorded their highest fatality totals in years, including construction laborers (highest since 2008); carpenters (2009); electricians (2009); and plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters (2003).



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