

# Young maquiladora factory workers dying in droves in US/Mexico border towns

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Defying the myth that COVID-19 primarily kills the elderly, young people who work in US-owned maquiladora factories in border towns such as Tijuana, in Baja California, and Juarez, in Chihuahua, are dying at alarming rates.

At least 83 workers in Baja California working in these plants have contracted COVID-19 and have died. In the city of Juarez, Chihuahua at least 25 deaths reported are tied to the maquiladora industry. While it is the case that Mexico, and Baja California in particular, have younger populations compared to the United States, health and government officials report that fatalities reflect the heavy toll coronavirus has taken on border factory workers, where the majority of workers are between 25 and 45 years of age.

According to findings by Mexican mathematician and computer scientist Dr. Raul Rojas, the majority of the young people who have contracted COVID-19 and have died in border cities like Tijuana and Juarez worked in maquiladoras—factories owned primarily by US companies to access cheap labor within special economic zones.

Dr. Rojas compared the death rates among various age groups to that of San Diego County, California, where the total population is similar, and which is located just across the Tijuana, Mexico border.

Rojas found that as of May 27, at least seven children from 0-19 years of age have died, 16 young people between 20 and 29 compared to two in San Diego, and 57 deaths for those aged 30-39 compared to three in San Diego. Those aged 40-49 are dying at a rate about 25 times higher in Baja California: 153 deaths versus six in San Diego, and among those aged 50-59, the number of deaths is nearly 10 times higher, with 207 deaths compared to 21 in San Diego.

Though likely a great underestimation, reports in Mexico indicate that the total COVID-19 cases have

reached 124,000, and that the disease has claimed over 14,700 lives. Data analyst and software engineer Mario Romero Zavala analyzed death certificates in Mexico City, and reported to the *Times* that he found excess mortality—the number of deaths above the historical average—was 8,000 in May alone in Mexico City. Zavala said there is every reason to believe the real numbers are at least four times higher than what is reported, which would make Mexico's actual death toll around 60,000.

The gross underreporting is part of deliberate policy that is bound up with Mexican President López Obrador's "back to work" initiative, pushed by Wall Street and with the backing of Washington. Despite the fact that cases in Mexico continue to skyrocket, three weeks ago Lopez Obrador insisted that the country is "seeing the light at the end of the tunnel." Sergio Moctezuma, the state labor secretary for Baja California, said that in the state, "The vast majority of infected people are factory workers."

Thirty-three-year old Silvia Lorena Abrego Hernandez lost her 35-year-old husband Jose in mid-April. She told the *Times* that she "halfway expected the hospital to call and say they made a mistake." Her husband, Jose Luis Cebrero Cisneros, worked long shifts as a truck driver for the maquiladora industry, bringing home \$15 a day, or \$90 a week. Like many other workers, his symptoms were overlooked despite being reported. He was ordered to continue his shifts visiting factories despite having a fever.

While life for millions is hanging by a thread, the factory industry is booming, employing over 3 million people. The industry accounts for some 25 percent of Mexico's GDP, and many factories have remained open. With the full approval of the Lopez Obrador government, and faced with pressure from car manufacturers and other industries in the United States, many maquiladoras have reopened or simply stayed open, defying orders, while death tolls in the factories continue to rise. Under these

conditions, it is no surprise that there are major spikes in deaths in these areas, becoming epicenters of the disease within the country.

Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico which shares a border with San Diego, California in the US, operates at least 600 maquiladoras—60 percent of those in the state—and employs nearly 195,000 workers. Baja California has at least 5,784 confirmed cases and 1,200 deaths, giving it the second-highest number of cases next to the capital, Mexico City. In mid-May the health secretary of Northern Baja California announced that 432 of the 519 people who had officially died of the coronavirus in the state as of that date were maquiladora workers.

Juarez, which borders El Paso, Texas in the US, is home to the majority of the maquiladoras in the state of Chihuahua. At least 300,000 workers are employed at the 160 largest maquiladoras in the city. The state has reported 633 deaths and a total of 2,713 cases. The border town of Juarez also is an epicenter within the state, with 376 deaths, or more than half of the deaths in the state.

Despite government orders in late March to close non-essential business, only a minority of the thousands of maquiladora factories halted operations, while most remained open and continued to produce for the automotive, electronics, aerospace, consumer products and medical device industries.

With the full approval of the Lopez Obrador government and faced with pressure from car manufacturers and other industries in the United States, those that were closed have reopened, relying on a desperate labor force willing to risk their lives to increase profits.

Jessica, a 25-year-old math teacher who lives in Tijuana, spoke to the WWSWS about conditions of daily life for the majority of workers in the region. She began by noting that many people participate in the informal sector even if they have employment, as Mexico's minimum wage equates to a little over \$6.50 per day.

"A lot of people here in TJ work on the actual street or within the maquiladora factories which are foreign-owned. They don't want to pay for the labor so they come here. I have friends who work at the foreign-owned factories, and none of them wanted to close. People were getting sick with coronavirus and a friend of mine was so scared about infecting her family that she had to produce a false doctor's note saying she had coronavirus symptoms to prevent her from getting fired when she refused to go in.

"It isn't that people in Tijuana don't want to follow the

rules or are not worried. They are very concerned, but people can't stop leaving their homes because of their job situation. There is no government assistance and so they are forced to go to work.

"My friend's father passed away. He was over 60 but they couldn't take him to any hospital. Everywhere the capacity is full. Meanwhile the maquiladoras are open because the US groups are just concerned about money for their business, but is that really worth more than a life?"

Workers throughout Mexico's maquiladora industry and the world over are being sacrificed for the pursuit of profit. Auto plants have reopened across the US and Canada, with efforts to prevent the spread of the virus that serve to present the myth of safety. Additionally, workers, primarily immigrant workers, continue to die in large numbers in the agriculture, meatpacking, transit and health care industries.

From one country to the next, the virus is proving to be an illness of the poor, with the most vulnerable layers heavily affected.

The maquiladora industry draws tens of thousands of particularly young people from small, poor towns to work in factories operated by some of the richest corporations in the world, such as General Electric, Alcoa and DuPont. Overall this is a young population and some 60 percent of maquiladora workers are women and girls, many as young as 13 or 14.

Workers in Mexico must begin linking up with their counterparts throughout North America and the world. The capitalist governments, corporations and trade unions are working hand in glove to send them into deadly conditions for the pursuit of profit.

Workers must begin to take action to defend their lives, develop health and safety conditions at their job sites, and ensure that the safety and life of every single worker across their industries, which reach past borders and wrap around the planet, are prioritized over all other factors.

Immediately, this fight for the basic democratic right to life places workers up against the capitalist system.



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