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Empowering the Korean American Community

“Forgotten Workers”: A Study of Low-Wage Korean Immigrant Workers in the Metropolitan New York Area

There are over 200,000 Korean Americans working in the New York City area, many of them living below the poverty line. These working poor include waiters, hairdressers, nail salon workers, and grocery cashiers. Many workers in the Korean community are often subjected to serious, unlawful labor violations – they are not properly paid minimum wage or overtime, are forced to work in hazardous conditions, for overly long hours, and without proper safety equipment. Many face additional barriers because they are immigrants and/or non-citizens.

These problems are compounded by the fact that there is little detailed information about this community. While there have been a handful of research studies about the Korean community, there has been no such research about Korean low-wage workers and the extent and nature of their problems. In recognition of this, YKASEC and AALDEF's Korean Workers Project launched a comprehensive new study of low-wage Korean workers – the first study of its kind.

Executive Summary

KWP surveyed and examined the working conditions of 184 Korean immigrant workers employed in various low-wage industries, including dry cleaners, garment manufacturing, groceries and delis, restaurants, hair and nail salons, and health spas. Key findings include:

- 28% of workers surveyed are undocumented immigrants.
- Almost all (94%) of the workers are limited English proficient.
- The average number of hours worked per week is 55.
 - Almost two-thirds (64%) of workers work more than 50 hours per week.
 - Nearly half (47%) work 60 hours or more.
- 73% of workers said they have no agreement to get paid a higher amount for overtime hours.
- 15% have experienced health problems or gotten injured as a result of their job.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of the workers did not know about workers compensation.
- More than half (55%) did not know about unemployment insurance, and only 11% of workers have actually ever applied.
- Close to a quarter (24%) of all workers think they will lose their jobs if they complain to management.
- 91% are not part of a union or any other organization to protect them.
- Nearly one-third (31%) currently hold more than one job to support themselves.

These findings indicate that Korean workers in the metropolitan New York area continue to face serious problems in the workplace. They are more likely to be undocumented immigrants, and much more likely to be limited English proficient than the Korean American population as a whole. Perhaps because of these reasons, the large majority of Korean workers are working more than 40 hours a week, but do not get paid proper overtime wages for these hours, nor are they aware of the rights they have to file for benefits if they are unemployed or are injured on the job. These findings underline the need for stronger efforts at education and outreach to this disadvantaged population.

Methodology

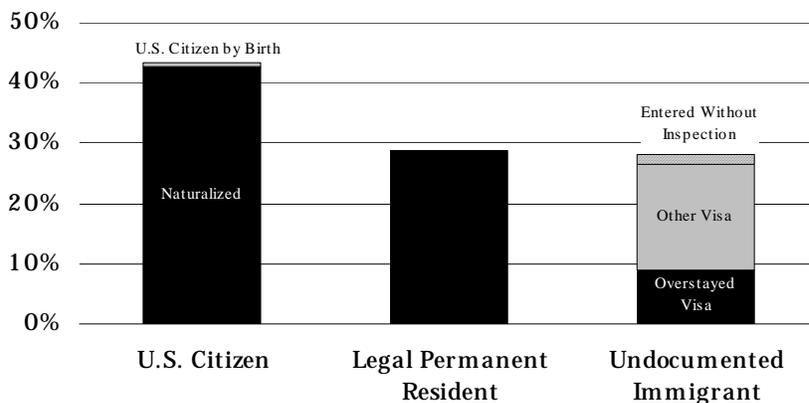
The study is based on anonymous, confidential survey forms containing questions relating to wages, hours, overtime pay, working conditions and work safety, as well as workers' knowledge of the services available to them, such as unemployment insurance, workers compensation, and disability benefits. The aim of the study was to create a detailed profile about Korean low-wage workers and their employment.

The survey forms were collected over a one-year period between January 2005 and 2006. Various outreach methods were used to ensure the full participation of the Korean worker community, including tabling at community events, outreach at Korean churches, and distribution through community-based organizations. Each respondent was interviewed in person in Korean, and the survey instrument was in English and Korean.

Demographic Profile

58% of the survey respondents are male, and 42% are female. Nearly three-quarters (73%) are aged 40 and above. The mean age is 49 years. More than a third (37%) has less than a high school education. 8% indicated that they went to technical school.

Immigration Status



Nearly all (94%) originally came from Korea.

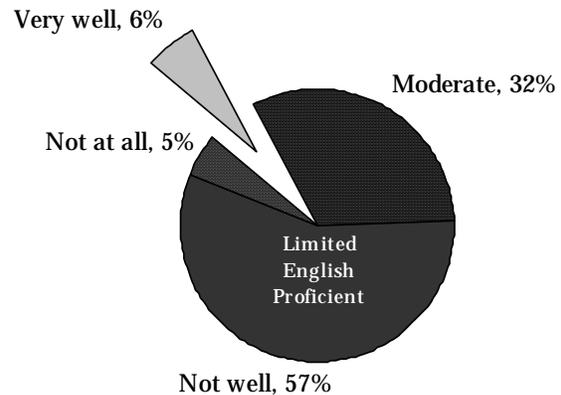
Over a quarter (28%) of the workers are undocumented immigrants.

1 in 5 (22%) workers immigrated to the United States in the last five years. Only 1% of the workers are US-born.

94% are limited English proficient.

More than two-thirds (66%) live in households with more than 3 people. They live primarily with their spouse and children; some live with relatives, friends or other workers. 9% live alone.

Limited English Proficiency



Conditions of Employment

Current Job Location

Queens	42%
Manhattan	23%
New Jersey	14%
Brooklyn	5%
Long Island	5%
Westchester	4%
Bronx	3%
Other Location	3%

78% indicated that they work full-time. 16% work part time, while 3% do temporary work, 2% are on call and 1% do seasonal work.

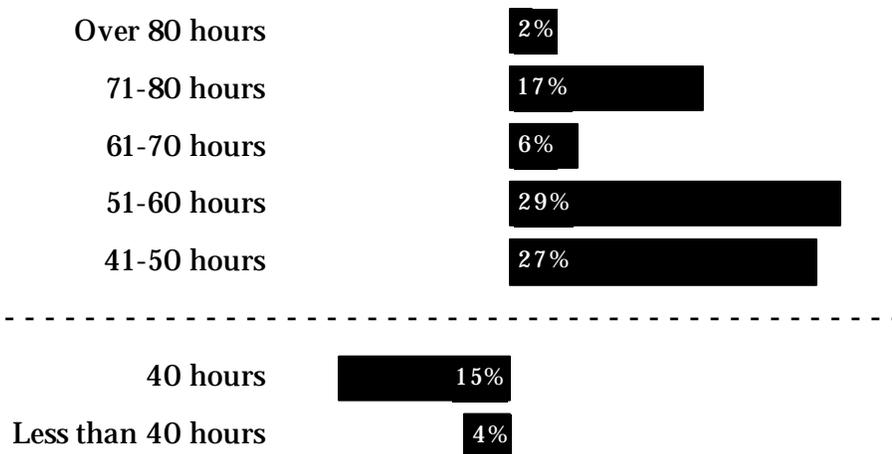
Almost half (41%) of them have 3 years or less of experience in their industry.

31% currently have more than one job.

Close to a quarter (23%) do not get any meal break.

On average, survey respondents work 55.4 hours per week.

Hours Worked Per Week



- Almost two-thirds (64%) stated that they worked over 50 hours per week, and nearly half (47%) work 60 hours or more.
- 73% said they have no agreement to get paid a higher amount for overtime hours.
- 58% receive pay stubs or other records of employment.
- 75% receive W-2 tax forms from their employer every year.
- 24% of workers felt that they would lose their jobs if they complain to management.
- 54% said they have no official way to voice grievances.
- 91% are not part of a union or any other organization to protect them.
- 9% reported that their employer owes them money. Some workers have had confrontations with their employers. A few have sought assistance from private attorneys or have filed lawsuits in state or federal district court.

Employment Benefits

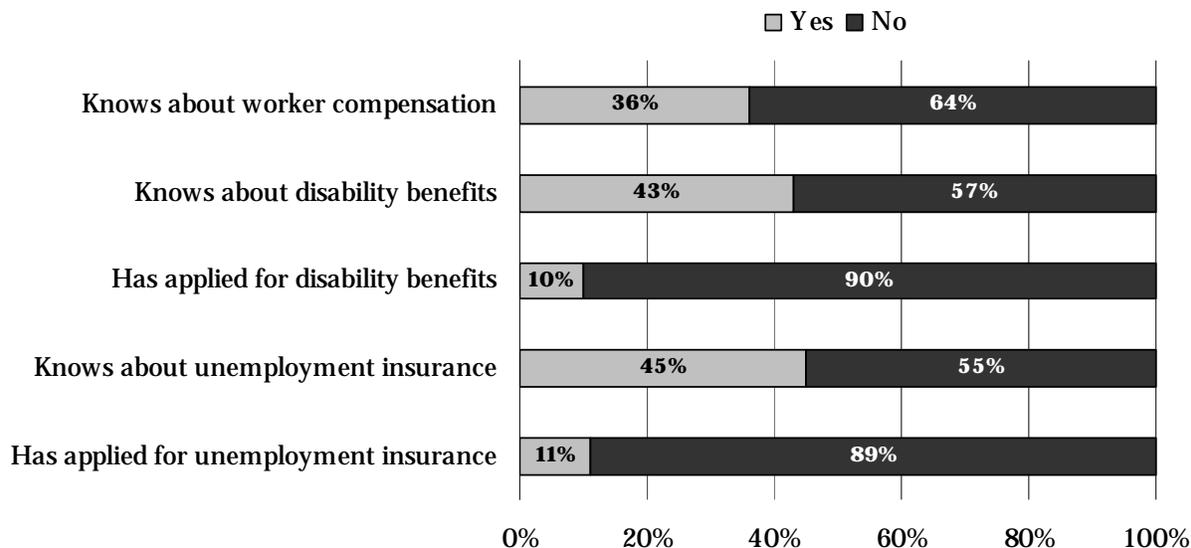
“Mr. Cho, a warehouse worker at an electronics retailer, suffered a debilitating abdominal injury when hit by a large, heavy box. He did not receive proper medical care nor payment for lost wages for two months because his employer never informed him he could file for workers compensation.”

Similarly, 15% of survey respondents stated that they have experienced health problems or gotten injured as a result of their job. Several workers have sustained a needle puncture on the job. Others complained of headaches because the air circulation was not good. As a result, 15% of survey respondents indicated that they have sought medical care for this problem. 21% said they also had to take time off from work.

Workers who are injured on the job are usually entitled to receive workers' compensation benefits for the treatment of their injuries and for part of their lost wages. However, almost two-thirds (64%) of the workers do not know about workers compensation even though all immigrant workers are eligible to receive these benefits.

Furthermore, workers who are injured off the job or shortly after ending their job are usually entitled to disability benefits for their lost wages. Yet, over half (57%) did not have any knowledge that they were eligible to receive disability benefits, and in fact, only 10% have actually applied for these benefits.

Additionally, workers who lose their job through no fault of their own may be eligible to receive unemployment compensation benefits for up to six months. Survey findings show that 12% of workers felt that they have been fired through no fault of their own. But less than half (45%) were even aware of these unemployment benefits. Only 11% have ever applied before.



KWP is designed to protect the rights of these Korean immigrant workers and to help them achieve social and economic justice. For more information, contact Steven Choi, Staff Attorney and Director of the Korean Workers Project at the Asian American Legal Defense & Education Fund:

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