
From the Instructor

In their second essay, WR 100 students revisit how Upton Sinclair's 1905 novel *The Jungle* prompted a presidentially-directed investigation that confirmed his findings of immigrant exploitation in "Packingtown." A century later, undercover documentaries of the modern meatpacking industry suggest that little has changed, though industry representatives counter that such employment constitutes economic opportunity for immigrant workers.

Students tested the industry's assertion, drawing on competing government and industry statistics of worker injury. One fall day Sameer appeared in class having graphically plotted both sets of numbers to demonstrate the unreliability of industry-backed risk rates and a misleading representation of worker wellbeing. This essay represents his effort to enter the public "conversation" and to argue for change.

— Melanie Smith

From the Writer

Most of my essays arise from my own opinions and are then shaped and supported by evidence. This essay, however, was different.

On this particular day, our WR 100 class had just finished our first papers of the year, having submitted them the previous class. To begin the work on our next essay and to introduce the idea of counter-argument, Ms. Smith had the class look at data from the American Meat Institute (AMI). But as I digested the numbers and began to form my stance, I realized that they were incomplete—subtly biased to tell a certain story. As someone who loves math, Microsoft Excel, and complete stories, I knew that there was really only one solution.

Ten minutes later, I was the only one with no counter-argument written. But I was also the only one who had a spreadsheet filling in the holes of the AMI's story while simultaneously laying out my own narrative. As it turns out, much more than a lone spreadsheet is required to write a great essay. Namely, it involves actually writing a counter-argument, discarding about two-thirds of my first draft, and committing hours and hours of time.

But in the end, that spreadsheet did become my story: a story that is told in my paper “Exploitation in the 21st Century: Illegal Immigrants in the Meatpacking Industry.”

— Sameer Farooq

EXPLOITATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN THE MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

American folklore is full of inspirational, so-called “rags to riches” stories, chronicling the rise of immigrants against all odds. Although immigrants faced many challenges at the turn of the twentieth century, grueling working conditions largely defined their stories and often led to tragic consequences. Nowhere were these challenges more prevalent than in the meatpacking industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was characterized by its willing immigrant workforce and its exploitative work environment. One hundred years later, most citizens are both shocked by these horrendous conditions and pleased with the apparent improvement in industry practices over time. Yet, growing evidence suggests that either public ignorance or the sanctioning of low safety standards is behind this belief in the current safety of the meatpacking industry. Put differently, in expecting extremely low-priced food without considering its origins, citizens implicitly condone the practices of factory farms, some of the largest and most dangerous corporations in America. In addition to overlooking flagrant animal abuse, citizens disregard the chronic mistreatment of workers, particularly illegal immigrants. Incredibly, the industry’s defenders, including one anonymous writer at *The Economist*, have suggested that the benefits of higher wages and more opportunity in America outweigh the risks of menial jobs in the meatpacking industry (“Of meat” 1–2). But for each successful immigrant, there are many others who do not escape unscathed. By glossing over on-the-job dangers and the rampant exploitation of meatpacking workers, these defenders of the industry *explicitly* condone the actions of the meatpacking industry and, in some ways, encourage them. In

fact, the risks, exploitation, and overall abysmal working conditions in meatpacking plants far outweigh the benefits of the job for all workers, particularly for illegal immigrants.

Leaders of the industry would attack this claim at its root, arguing that safety for meatpacking workers is a high priority, in stark contrast to the dangerous and poor working conditions of meatpacking plants as described by government investigators Charles P. Neill and James B. Reynolds in 1906. Their seminal report revealed that the great majority of meatpacking plants were dimly lit, poorly ventilated, and extraordinarily unsanitary (4–5). By contrast, current statistics released by the American Meat Institute (AMI) show that common measures of illness and injury, such as “Total Recordable Cases of Injury per 100 Full-Time Workers” and “Total Lost Work Days per 100 Full-Time Workers,” have declined (2). In addition, the incidence of injuries and illnesses is the lowest since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began recording this data in 1970 (AMI 1). However, the AMI has presented this data in a calculated attempt to avoid the real issue of current worker safety. No reasonable person would argue that the meatpacking industry has not become *safer* over time. However, he *would* argue that despite becoming safer, it is still nowhere near safe enough. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the food manufacturing industry as a whole reported 6.2 work-related injuries per 100 full-time workers, higher than the manufacturing sector rate of 5.0 cases and much higher than the overall private industry rate of 3.9 (“Injuries” 1). Furthermore, the meatpacking industry (referred to as “Animal slaughtering and processing”) has a rate of 7.5 cases per 100 full-time workers (“Injuries” 2). While this may not seem that much higher than the other averages, it is about 21 percent higher than the food manufacturing industry as a whole and a whopping 50 percent higher than the manufacturing industry as a whole.

A number of other statistics also show the injury and illness rate in the meatpacking industry to be higher than any other food-manufacturing sector. While the meatpacking industry, specifically the AMI, prefers to focus on the decrease in injuries and illnesses, it does not account for the much higher rate overall. Although highly misleading, this bait-and-switch of statistics is far from unexpected. The continued existence of the AMI depends on the prosperity of the meatpacking industry as a whole, so

it is logical that it would avoid the real question by focusing on largely irrelevant numbers.

However, rather than deny on-the-job risks, most of the industry's defenders simply minimize those risks by pointing out apparent benefits of the work. The aforementioned anonymous writer at *The Economist* employs this tactic in a 2006 article, "Of meat, Mexicans, and social mobility; Immigration and 'The Jungle.'" The author quickly establishes the article's legitimacy by referencing Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* within the first sentence. The writer points out that although capitalism is no longer in question as Upton Sinclair believed, people are still concerned with the questions, "Can immigrants still work their way up from the bottom? Can they become American?" (1). The article tells the story of one illegal immigrant, Alberto Queiroz, who was paid the ludicrous hourly wage of \$2.50 while working in a Los Angeles clothes factory. After moving to some better-paying but short-term jobs, he eventually ended up at a Smithfield Foods plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina. According to Queiroz, although the work was hard, fast, and extremely repetitive (and admittedly, sometimes dangerous), it enabled him to earn wages of more than \$10 per hour. Just as they did a century earlier, these immigrant success stories justify perilous working conditions as a stepping-stone to the American dream. But by focusing on one person, the argument falls short. For each tale of an immigrant who does "work [his] way up from the bottom," there are many more who are irreparably injured on the job, their futures permanently handicapped.

But, the author then makes the point that "Taxi-drivers are 34 times more likely to die on the job than meatpackers" ("Of meat" 1). Indeed, the author believes that he proves his point by showing that the seemingly dangerous job of meatpacking is actually much safer than taxi driving. However, this trite rhetorical strategy actually serves to reduce the effectiveness of the author's argument. Any number of similar comparisons can be made between two completely different areas, and like this comparison, they are all equally meaningless. The risks of a taxi driver are largely unavoidable because they are simply risks that all drivers face. Conversely, the risks in the meatpacking industry result from the incessant focus on maximizing profits, even at a detriment to worker safety. To put it

concisely, one set of risks is impossible to control; the other set is simply deemed unimportant.

Moreover, the author simply mentions risk and injury as possibilities, not seriously considering those workers who either died (without life insurance) or were so seriously injured that their ability to work was impaired. As Christopher D. Cook points out in “Sliced and Diced,” almost none of the immigrant workers have health insurance because the cost is too high (233). That means their injuries often go untreated and are easily re-aggravated. For injured workers, not only does their quality of life greatly suffer, but also as hourly workers, the opportunity cost of injury is immense. First, there is the initial time away from work due to injury, which is a median of nine days for musculoskeletal disorders (“Injuries” 2), and then any re-aggravation of the injury means even more days away from work. Each day away from work could mean a loss of over \$100, which will have a huge impact on the workers’ livelihood. Beyond that loss, they risk being replaced and losing their jobs altogether. According to Cook, this turnover rate reaches 200 percent in some plants (234).

In addition, Cook scrutinizes the claim that relatively high wages act as a reward for tackling the dangers of the meatpacking industry. He also points out that the lack of unionization in the industry means that immigrant workers are paid relatively very little—about \$6 to \$9—although it may seem like a high wage to them (234–235). Furthermore, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1998 dollars, meat packing workers’ hourly wages have actually *declined* by \$5.74 since 1981 (Cook 235).

Yet, *The Economist* fails to mention these actual facts about meat packers’ hourly wages, instead opting to use the single example of Alberto Queiroz. Indeed, seemingly relevant statistics only appear once in *The Economist* article, during a discussion of the American dream:

Mexicans have grown much richer by coming to the United States...And their children are doing even better. Whereas only 40% of first-generation Mexican immigrants between the ages of 16 and 20 are in school or college, nearly two-thirds of the second

generation are. Between the ages of 21 and 25 the leap is even more striking, from 7.3% to 24.4%.” (2)

While these statistics may be true, the author utilizes the misleading techniques of the AMI. By discussing an anecdote of a meatpacking worker earlier, the author implies that these statistics of future success apply to immigrant meatpackers. While a portion of the statistics may have some relevance, this use of broader statistics instead of focusing on meatpacking Mexicans is blatantly dishonest. And like most of the arguments in “Of meat, Mexicans, and social mobility,” this claim about the American dream also falls flat.

Yet, it is all too easy to believe the reassuring arguments presented in *The Economist* and the worker safety information from the AMI. Citizens have also become complacent because of the obvious improvements in industry safety over time. Taken all together, the meatpacking industry seems at least reasonably safe, and certainly safe enough so that the benefits of work outweigh the risks for immigrant workers. But the true story is one of statistical manipulation and the use of carefully selected anecdotes to gloss over major problems still present in the meatpacking industry. To remain a country with a high capacity for social mobility and self-advancement, America must radically reform the meatpacking industry. And until a safe working environment is truly achieved, the only opportunity that America offers illegal immigrants is the opportunity to be exploited.

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SAMEER FAROOQ, a member of BU’s Seven-Year Liberal Arts/Medical Education Program, is double majoring in medical science and mathematics. He is an avid reader and greatly enjoys writing in his free time. This past year, Sameer discovered his passion for stand-up comedy and currently performs original routines at BU Central’s monthly Open Mic Nights. This essay was written for Melanie Smith’s course, WR 100: Topics in the History of Public Health.