

Suicides rates among US construction and mine workers at alarming levels

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Studies published recently by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have revealed that construction and mine workers in the US are committing suicide at alarming rates.

An analysis published last December by the CDC, based on data collected in 2021, reported that the suicide rates in these industries are nearly double the average of all occupations and the highest of 20 industry groups examined.

The CDC analyzed suicide deaths by industry and occupation in 49 states using data from the 2021 National Vital Statistics System. The study noted, “The suicide rate among the US working-age population has increased approximately 33 percent during the last 2 decades.”

The study found that “overall suicide rates by sex in the civilian noninstitutionalized working population were 32.0 per 100,000 among males and 8.0 per 100,000 among females.”

In the construction industry, the suicide rate among male workers was 56 per 100,000 and 10 per 100,000 for women. In the Construction and Extraction occupation group, which includes all building trades as well as mining, oil and gas workers, the rates were more than double the average, reaching 65.6 per 100,000 for men and 25.3 per 100,000 for women.

A similar analysis conducted by the CDC in 2016 from 32 states showed that suicide rates among Construction and Extraction were at 49.4 per 100,000 for men and 25.5 per 100,000 for women. This means that the suicide rate among men in these occupations went up by 33 percent between 2016 and 2021.

Some industry experts attribute the rapid rise in suicides to the intense pressures on these workers during a construction boom and an ongoing shortage of workers.

Much of the media coverage of the suicide rates among construction workers is concentrated on the issues of access to mental health services and combatting the stigma of mental health problems among this layer of workers.

While there is a significant need for mental health services, there are other issues that lie behind the rise in suicides that are part of the intensified exploitation of construction and extraction workers by the capitalist employers.

The first of these is the impact of injuries on workers. According to Dr. Mitchel Rosen, the director of the Center for Public Health Workforce Development at the Rutgers University School of Public Health, industry-related factors, such as injuries that damage muscles and tendons due to repetitive motions and constant use, compound the potential for suicidal ideation.

Rosen told *NJ Spotlight News* that working through some injuries due to insufficient paid time off or fear of unaffordable healthcare costs are among the contributing causes to suicide. Rosen also pointed out that 15 percent of construction and extraction workers are US military veterans, who also have a high rate of suicide compared to the rest of the population.

According to a report by NBC News on Monday, “A recent surge in construction projects, spurred by billions of federal dollars for infrastructure, clean energy and semiconductor projects have put increasing strain on an already stretched workforce.”

The Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) reported in January that the construction industry would need an additional 500,000 workers to meet labor demands in 2024. Chief economist of ABC Anirban Basu said:

There are structural factors, including outsized retirement levels, megaprojects in several private and public construction segments and cultural factors that encourage too few young people to enter the skilled construction trades. ...

More than 1 in 5 construction workers are 55 or older, meaning that retirement will continue to contract the industry's workforce. These are the most experienced workers, and their departures are especially concerning.

NBC News also reported that \$450 billion in funding provided by the Biden administration to the semiconductor industry to build 80 new manufacturing facilities in 25 states has led to excessive overtime and the relocation of workers needed for these high-pressure projects.

Intel is building a \$20 billion facility in Arizona with financial support from the US government. NBC News reported workers are on the construction site for "two 60-hour weeks followed by a 50-hour week for months at a time in the hot Arizona weather with no paid vacation time."

Many of these workers are coming from out of state and leaving their friends and families behind to live in temporary housing or hotels for months or years at a time. Josh Vitale, a superintendent for Hoffman Construction, the general contractor overseeing the construction of the Intel computer chip factory, told NBC News, "There's a lot that goes into how stressful it is, not just physically, but mentally and psychologically ... we have to realize that we are legitimately wringing the life out of people."

Vitale continued, "It would be rare to find someone in the industry who hasn't known a person that has taken their life within the last year or two. As an industry, we just keep putting more and more pressure on the worker to outperform what they've done before, and at some point, it's just untenable."

Elizabeth Clemens, the executive director for the New Jersey chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Suicide, told *NJ Spotlight News* that suicide is a complex issue with many factors contributing to it, including access to lethal means.

Clemens said, "I don't think that specific occupations in and of themselves have higher rates due to the

occupation itself." She noted that access to physical and mental healthcare, reasonable workloads under safe conditions, and education and awareness can all reduce the risk factors.

While employer associations have referred to wages among construction workers as "skyrocketing" in the past year, average hourly wages increased 3.2 percent in 2023 to \$30.73 per hour. Meanwhile, in 2020, the highest paid CEO in the construction industry, David Auld of D.R. Horton Inc., earned a compensation package worth \$30 million.



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