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A Hard Life, One Day At A Time: Immigrant workers: Employers cheat and abuse them; jobs scarce

[Claudia Mel](#). [Knight Ridder Tribune Business News](#). Washington: [Jan 30, 2006](#). pg. 1

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The first study of day laborers in the United States found that stories like those of [Alejandro Fuentes] and [Juan Manuel Garrido] are all too common. The National Day Labor Study, released last week, found that day laborers are regularly denied payment for their work, many are put in hazardous job sites, and most endure insults and abuses by employers.

In Monterey County, it is easy to find day laborers outside the [Home Depot](#) in Salinas, at a [7-Eleven](#) store on Fremont Boulevard in Seaside, and by the Kasey's store in Carmel Valley.

Outside [Home Depot](#) in Salinas, an average of 20 men gather each day in search of employers -- usually homeowners or contractors -- who will hire them for at least a few hours of work. Their clothing bears the signs of their occupations: splashes of paint, and dirt on the boots. Although many of the men keep quiet, they listen attentively and nod upon hearing an anecdote that resonates with their own experience.

Full Text (864 words)

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Jan. 30--Whether Alejandro Fuentes arrives early or late at a parking lot near [Home Depot](#) in Salinas, a day laborer gathering site, he knows his luck will be the same.

"There's not much work these days," the 25-year-old said in Spanish as he walked around the parking lot in Harden Ranch shopping center, hoping to find even a few hours of work.

But not finding jobs is only one of his worries. Like most day laborers, he also frets about getting fair pay for his work, about being chased out of the gathering sites, and about being labeled a nuisance.

"We're just here to find work, we're not here to steal," said Juan Manuel Garrido, a 45-year-old immigrant from Mexico. "Some people say we're here to cause mischief, but, no, we're here to offer our services, that's all."

The first study of day laborers in the United States found that stories like those of Fuentes and Garrido are all too common. The National Day Labor Study, released last week, found that day laborers are regularly denied payment for their work, many are put in hazardous job sites, and most endure insults and abuses by employers.

Based on interviews with 2,660 workers at 264 hiring sites in 20 states, the report found that almost half of the workers surveyed were not paid in the previous two months of the study. The vast majority rely on day labor as their sole source of income, and almost a fifth have been insulted by merchants where they gather to find work.

In Monterey County, it is easy to find day laborers outside the [Home Depot](#) in Salinas, at a [7-Eleven](#) store on Fremont Boulevard in Seaside, and by

the Kasey's store in Carmel Valley.

Many of the workers rotate where they go in hopes of improving their chance of being hired. Most, however, end up working only a few days out of the month, especially during winter when landscaping and construction jobs slow because of the weather.

"When the forecast says it's going to rain like today, people don't come looking," said Fuentes, adding that he's probably worked 10 days this month.

The study, conducted by Abel Valenzuela Jr. of UCLA and Nick Theodore of the University of Illinois at Chicago, found that average yearly earning for the workers rarely surpasses \$15,000, with an average of \$1,400 in good months and \$500 in bad ones.

As long as they don't get cheated out of their pay, the workers say they can stretch the money they earn on good months to last through bad ones. Often, that's not the case.

Javier Lopez worked for two days helping remodel a house in Salinas a few weeks ago, but said the man who hired him has not given him all he promised. He was supposed to earn \$10 an hour, or about \$200 for the two days, and he's still owed \$100.

"I went to see him today, and he gave me \$20," said Lopez, an immigrant from Oaxaca, Mexico. "And he tells me that he's going to take me to the police if I keep on asking him for my money."

Lopez doesn't know the man's last name. He said that when he tried to take a picture of his truck's license plate, the man became angry, snatched Lopez's phone and threw it on the ground.

The study found that almost 75 percent of day laborers are undocumented, which makes them an easy target of abuse.

Outside [Home Depot](#) in Salinas, an average of 20 men gather each day in search of employers -- usually homeowners or contractors -- who will hire them for at least a few hours of work. Their clothing bears the signs of their occupations: splashes of paint, and dirt on the boots. Although many of the men keep quiet, they listen attentively and nod upon hearing an anecdote that resonates with their own experience.

Roberto Gonzalez, 25, worked for a couple of days for a contractor who lives in Gilroy. After the contractor refused to pay him, he stopped going to try to get his money, but his cousin, who's still owed \$500, still clings to hope he'll get paid. He doesn't know the name of the contractor, or his address. He just knows how to get to his house.

The money is not much, but, compared to what many of the laborers used to get in Mexico, it is plenty.

"If we work one day, we get \$100," Fuentes said. "That's 1,000 pesos, you don't earn that in a week over there."

And the cost of housing, food and gas in this country?

"We sleep like sardines, like cigarettes in a box," said Fuentes. "But we only pay \$100, so we can do it."

For many of them, the saddest part of the abuse they endure is that it's often other Latinos who target them.

"We find good people and bad people," says Garrido. "But those Mexicans feel Americans are the ones who cheat us. They charge \$15 and pay us \$8. We're the ones paying their salaries."

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Credit: The Monterey County Herald, Calif.

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