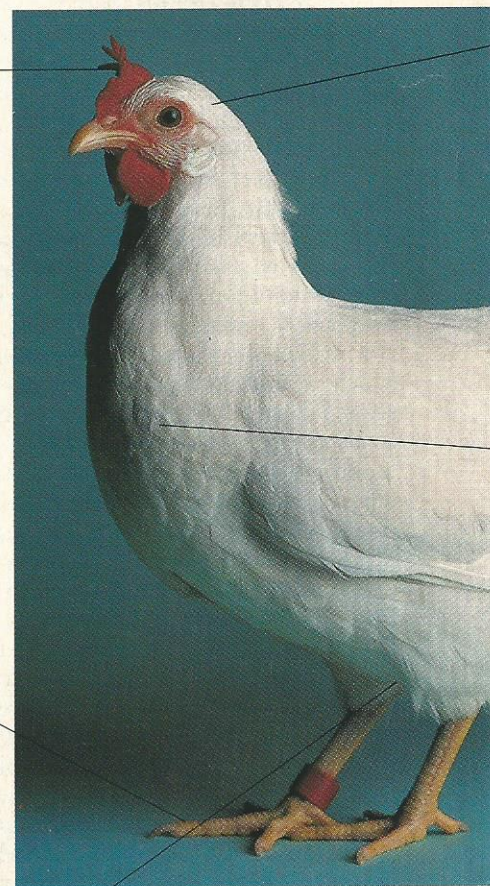


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In the nation's poultry plants, brutality to work

This seemingly harmless broiler chicken may in fact be the most dangerous animal in North America. Although this 3½-pound bird has a brain the size of a raisin and will live no longer than six weeks, its popularity with consumers (who now spend \$40 billion a year on chicken products) has ensured that it and its peers will injure 40,000 workers this year in America's 175 poultry-processing plants. Owing to a health-conscious culture that increasingly chooses grilled chicken over red meat, annual chicken consumption per capita has risen from 40 pounds in 1970 to 75 pounds today. And as demand has increased, so have line speeds in processing plants: in 1979 the USDA limit was 70 birds per minute; today it stands at 91 birds per minute, a figure based not on how quickly workers can safely do their jobs but on how quickly USDA meat inspectors can examine the carcasses. Eight billion chickens will be sacrificed this year to our desire for cheap, versatile meals and slimmer hips, but they will have their revenge: cumulative-trauma disorders among poultry workers are 16 times the national average, and there is little hope that the line will be slowing down anytime soon.



Amid clouds of ammonia and fecal matter carrying salmonella and other harmful bacteria, workers called "catchers" wade into 100-degree holding pens crowded with angry fowl. Braving sharp beaks and claws, they grasp the birds by their feet and hurl them into containers bound on trucks for the processing plant. A catcher generally handles 8,000 birds a day, many of which urinate on him. At the plant, "hangers" fasten the feet of up to 50 birds a minute (more than 20,000 a day) into metal shackles so that the dangling heads may most efficiently be lopped off by the razor-sharp wire just down the line. A typical plant can in one eight-hour shift turn 144,000 chickens into packages of ready-to-eat meat, but the human cost even early on in the process is high: rotator-cuff and other repetitive-motion injuries abound among hangers; catchers are prey to cuts, eye infections, and respiratory ailments.

Most plants now automate the process by which the chicken, after being scalded and plucked, is eviscerated, but a few still perform "evisc" by hand, and manual labor is employed in automated plants whenever the machines break down. Evisc workers must twist and pull the innards from 35 to 100 chickens per minute. Although they face the prospect of crippling carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis, many stay on the job because they lack other prospects and because their welfare benefits are limited, nationwide, to just five years. The situation is even bleaker for Missouri residents. In 1995 the meat-processing industry persuaded officials in that state to create a program that sends welfare recipients to work in chicken and hog factories. If they refuse an interview or a job, their benefits are severely reduced; if they take a job and then quit, they face the same penalty.

ROUBLE

ker as well as to bird, by *Christopher D. Cook*

"Inedibles" such as the head are transported by auger to the "of-fal room," where they are ground up and then poured into a gigantic vat to cook. The few unlucky souls who tend this room must endure sweltering heat and remain ever mindful that the horrible fumes released by the decomposing blood can, in rare cases, become poisonous in a confined space. Of more immediate concern are the augers, mixers, and blenders that crowd the room: workers must avoid getting caught in the machinery and dismembered. What comes out of this room? Chicken feed.



Boneless chicken breast is by far the most popular chicken product on the market; it is also the most labor-intensive. Workers in "debone" stand shoulder-to-shoulder, slicing and chopping their way through joints, tendons, and tough gristle, a process that requires 20 to 30 hard twisting motions per minute. Scissors and knives quickly dull, and workers often lacerate themselves or their neighbors when blades slip off the slimy carcasses. Investigators for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that 49 percent of the deboners in one plant had upper-body disorders, yet proposals within NIOSH to study the health impacts of work speed and pressure have been on hold for ten years. As debris piles up on counters and floors, even walking becomes dangerous. A 1997 Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) study of 51 plants found that 40 percent of injuries were back ailments from slips and falls. OSHA also found that most employees in the plants it surveyed were required to buy their own protective boots, gloves, and aprons, necessities that many poultry workers—who typically earn only \$6.50 an hour—simply did without. Some plants, OSHA learned, failed even to provide cleanup workers with eye protection from the ammonia used on plant floors, exposure to which has caused vision damage and, in a few cases, blindness.

More and more Americans are saying no to jobs in the chicken plants, and today 50 percent of the nation's 245,000 poultry workers are immigrants. In response to chronic worker turnover and labor shortages, Congress has proposed setting up a government-run "guest worker" program that would employ immigrant poultry laborers for up to two years (about as long as even the most determined worker is likely to last) before sending them home, perhaps without fingernails—a common reaction to the bacteria in chicken carcasses. That these workers could also lose the use of their hands is of little concern to those who profit from our bottomless appetite for cheap chicken. Injured foreigners aren't eligible for welfare or disability benefits, after all, and impoverished replacements will not hesitate to head north, seeking a better life on the killing line.

Christopher D. Cook is an investigative journalist based in San Francisco. He has written for the Christian Science Monitor, The Nation, and The Progressive. This is his first piece for Harper's Magazine.