

6-20-2023

The Impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the Consolidated Meatpacking System in the United States

Judith R. Solomon
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos>



Part of the [Epidemiology Commons](#), [Food Studies Commons](#), [Occupational Health and Industrial Hygiene Commons](#), [Social Justice Commons](#), and the [Unions Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Solomon, Judith R. (2023) "The Impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the Consolidated Meatpacking System in the United States," *Anthós*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 9.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/anthos.2023.12.1.9>

This open access Article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#). All documents in PDXScholar should meet [accessibility standards](#). If we can make this document more accessible to you, [contact our team](#).

Impact of SARS-CoV-2 on the Consolidated Meatpacking System in the United States

Judith Solomon

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has illustrated many inequalities in the food system of the United States. In the United States, a capitalist economy and a lack of regulation have led to a consolidated food system that harms consumers, workers, and the environment. One striking example of this is the meatpacking industry.¹ The United States government ignored the implications of COVID spread,² mass infection, and death due to a lack of countervailing political and legal power among meatpacking workers and their communities.

SARS-CoV-2 is a coronavirus that first appeared in Wuhan, China in late 2019. Globally, more than 500,000 people died during the first six months. Primarily an inflammatory respiratory virus, it binds to ACE2 receptors in the lungs.³ ACE2 receptors are also present in the brain, eyes, nasal cavity, oral cavity, thyroid, heart, blood vessels, liver, gallbladder, kidneys, bladder, stomach, pancreas, intestines, ovaries, uterus, placenta, vagina, testis, and skin.⁴ Common long-term sequelae include fatigue, shortness of breath, muscle pain, memory loss, concentration issues, and insomnia. COVID-19, like SARS, MERS, and RSV, spreads efficiently when people are close together with poor ventilation.⁵

¹ For simplicity's sake, meatpacking also refers to poultry processing in this article. These industries have slight differences in safety and demographics, but much research and reporting group the two together.

² This article will use SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, and COVID interchangeably. Additionally, this article refers to the pandemic in the present tense, as it is ongoing. It is important to acknowledge that many public health provisions from the start of the pandemic no longer exist, including funding for contact tracing and reporting of cases in many communities.

³ Ben Hu, Hua Guo, Peng Zhou, and Zheng-Li Shi, "Characteristics of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19," *Nature Reviews Microbiology* 19, no. 3 (March 2021): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41579-020-00459-7>; Silvio Daniel Pitlik, "COVID-19 Compared to Other Pandemic Diseases," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 11, no. 3 (July 31, 2020): e0027, <https://doi.org/10.5041/RMMJ.10418>.

⁴ Francesca Salamanna, Melania Maglio, Maria Paola Landini, and Milena Fini, "Body Localization of ACE-2: On the Trail of the Keyhole of SARS-CoV-2," *Frontiers in Medicine* 7 (2020), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmed.2020.594495>.

⁵ Kati Blocker, "Is RSV Contagious? Everything You Need to Know about This Virus," *UCHealth Today*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.uchealth.org/today/how-long-is-rsv-contagious-get-facts-about-this-virus/>; Qing Han, Bang Zheng, Luke Daines, and Aziz Sheikh, "Long-Term Sequelae of COVID-19: A Systematic

As of March 1st, 2023, there have been at least 103,425,166 confirmed cases and 1,119,957 deaths from COVID in the United States. That is around 323 deaths per 100,000 people.⁶ COVID has disproportionately affected Black, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander communities and low-income communities in the United States.⁷ In Wisconsin, for example, Latinos comprise about 6% of the population but about 23% of all cases. These disparities are unsurprising, given that race and class are the most significant predictors of health in the United States.⁸

Review and Meta-Analysis of One-Year Follow-Up Studies on Post-COVID Symptoms,” *Pathogens* 11, no. 2 (February 19, 2022): 269, <https://doi.org/10.3390/pathogens11020269>; Kai Kupferschmidt, “Why Do Some COVID-19 Patients Infect Many Others, Whereas Most Don’t Spread the Virus at All?,” *Science*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.science.org/content/article/why-do-some-covid-19-patients-infect-many-others-where-as-most-don-t-spread-virus-all>; Maywa de Wit Montenegro, “What Grows from a Pandemic? Toward an Abolitionist Agroecology,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 99–136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1854741>.

⁶ “COVID-19 Map,” Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2023, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

⁷ Racial and ethnic categories vary by study. It is important to acknowledge that these categories do not always reflect people’s actual identities, and there is great diversity inside these categories Norman B. Anderson, Rodolfo A. Bulatao, Barney Cohen, and Ethnicity National Research Council (US) Panel on Race, “Racial and Ethnic Identification, Official Classifications, and Health Disparities, Critical Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Differences in Health in Late Life,” *National Academies Press* (2004): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK25522/>; Magdalena Arroyo, “Why ‘Hispanic/Latino’ Isn’t a Racial Category on the U.S. Census,” *IDEALS Institute*, University of Arkansas, August 31, 2020, <https://ideals.uark.edu/why-hispanic-latino-isnt-a-racial-category-on-the-u-s-census/>.

⁸ Ian R. Carrillo and Annabel Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones: Structural Precarity and COVID-19 in U.S. Meatpacking,” *Sociological Perspectives* 64, no. 5 (October 1, 2021): 726–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214211012025>; Latoya Hill and Samantha Artiga, “COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by Race/Ethnicity: Current Data and Changes Over Time,” *KFF*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/covid-19-cases-and-deaths-by-race-ethnicity-current-data-and-changes-over-time/>; Natalie Krebs, “COVID Cases in Meatpacking Plants Impacted Workers and Their Rural Communities,” *NPR*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/24/1067775073/covid-cases-in-meatpacking-plants-impacted-workers-and-their-rural-communities>; Ali Loker and Charles Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty: Urgent Need for Agroecology and Systems Thinking in a Post-COVID-19 Future,” *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 44, no. 9 (October 20, 2020): 1118–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2020.1775752>; Elizabeth S. McClure, Pavithra Vasudevan, Zinzi Bailey, Snehal Patel, and Whitney R Robinson, “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 189, no. 11 (July 3, 2020): 1244–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa126>; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”; Heather Timmons, “U.S. Poor Died at Much Higher Rate from COVID than Rich, Report Says,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-poor-died-much-higher-rate-covid-than-rich-report-2022-04-04/>.

The food supply chain in the United States is structurally unstable. Each year, meatpacking plants process 9.3 billion chickens, 34 million cows, and 130 million pigs. The average person in the United States consumes between 225 and 274 pounds of meat in one year. The four largest meat processing companies, Tyson, JBS, Smithfield, and Cargill, control between 85 and 90% of market shares, including 85% of cattle and 70% of pork processing. These companies are no strangers to mass infection. The 2009 H1N1 outbreak was traced to a Smithfield plant in Mexico. In contrast, the largest 15 meat processing companies control about one-third of the market shares in Europe.⁹

In 2020 and early 2021, the top five meatpacking companies in the United States had COVID outbreaks in at least 90% of plants. Between March 2020 and February 2021, there were 59,000 documented COVID cases and 269 documented COVID deaths in meatpacking plants. More than 88% of deaths occurred in plants owned by the top five companies. In 2017, these companies had a combined revenue of 207 billion dollars, while about one in five meatpacking workers received governmental nutritional assistance. During the

⁹ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Alvin Chang, Michael Sainato, Nina Lakhani, Rashida Kamal, and Aliya Uteuova, "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power: 'It's Enormously Frightening,'" *The Guardian*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/16/meatpacking-industry-covid-outbreaks-workers>; Sarah E. Dempsey, Heather M. Zoller, and Kathleen P. Hunt. "The Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism: Racialized Logics of Food Chain Worker Disposability during the COVID-19 Crisis," *Food, Culture & Society* 0, no. 0 (February 2, 2022): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.2022916>; Xiao Dong, "USDA ERS - Higher Retail Meat Prices Reduced Household Economic Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Department of Agriculture, October 3, 2022, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2022/october/higher-retail-meat-prices-reduced-household-economic-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>; Leah Douglas, "Nearly 90% of Big US Meat Plants Had COVID-19 Cases in Pandemic's First Year - Data," *Reuters*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/nearly-90-big-us-meat-plants-had-covid-19-cases-pandemics-first-year-data-2022-01-14/>; Jessica Fu, "Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?" *The Counter*, January 5, 2022, <https://thecounter.org/big-four-meatpackers-antitrust-consolidation/>; Michael Grabell, "The Plot to Keep Meatpacking Plants Open During COVID-19," *ProPublica*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.propublica.org/article/documents-covid-meatpacking-tyson-smithfield-trump>; Michael Grabell, "Tyson Foods' Secret Recipe for Carving Up Workers' Comp," *ProPublica*, December 11, 2015, <https://www.propublica.org/article/tyson-foods-secret-recipe-for-carving-up-workers-comp>; Lauren Kaori Gurley, "Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/11/10/youth-workers-meat-packing/>; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"

SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, meatpacking companies increased profitability, with the profit margin of the top four biggest producers increasing by 300%. Meat prices increased by about 21% between 2021 and 2022, with pork increasing by 17% and poultry increasing by 8%.

Consolidation of production and distribution has led to a small handful of companies having almost complete control over the system in an anti-competitive market. These companies decide how the system operates, how food is produced, and what people eat. These companies' political power ensures they control the industry's regulation via lobbying and “self-regulation.” Most safety in meatpacking plants is left up to the companies to do “voluntarily.” A lack of regulation in the meat industry has made it so that corporations decide who is expendable. The United States government has allowed for this consolidation and monopolization of the food market in areas including land control, insurance, and animal feed. This creates issues in public health and food security - in the ability to feed the country - and labor and the environment. The food supply chain is unable to deal effectively with disruptions and disasters, such as the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.¹⁰

The consolidation of the meatpacking industry means that a small number of companies control almost all of the jobs, leading to low wages and dangerous measures to cut time and cost.¹¹ The state apparatus in the United States actively

¹⁰ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Mary K. Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 37, no. 3 (2020): 579–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10092-y>; Jae Young Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience: Essential Workers in the Meatpacking Industry and the Pandemic,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 53, no. 1 (February 2022): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000432>; Loker and Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty”; McClure et al., “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”; Benjamin Wood, Owain Williams, Phil Baker, Vijaya Nagarajan, and Gary Sacks, “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health: Exploring the Structure-Conduct-Performance Model from a Public Health Perspective,” *Globalization and Health* 17 (April 6, 2021): 41, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00688-2>; Athena K. Ramos, Abigail E. Lowe, Jocelyn J. Herstein, Shelly Schwedhelm, Kelly K. Dineen, and John J. Lowe, “Invisible No More: The Impact of COVID-19 on Essential Food Production Workers,” *Journal of Agromedicine* 25, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 378–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2020.1814925>.

¹¹ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Michael Grabell, “Photos: Returning to the Roots of Case Farms’ Workforce,” *ProPublica*, May 1, 2017,

colludes with the agribusiness industry to maintain inequality and the exploitation of workers. This is part of a larger pattern of valuing corporate profits over human lives. Indeed, the Governor of Iowa said, “The economic harm caused by meat plant closures would outweigh the health risks to workers.”¹² In the United States, corporations have more legal rights than the workers they employ. For decades, the goal of consolidation in the meat industry has been to pass the risk from the corporations to the workforce, public, and environment. The industry is designed to extract as much profit as possible from the animals and the workers who process them. Industrial agriculture is profoundly damaging to human and environmental health yet remains underregulated. Large-scale farms and meatpacking plants are exempt from parts of federal air pollution laws and the Clean Water Act.¹³

Systemic vulnerabilities faced by meatpacking workers have led to mass infection and death. Meat companies, the Federal Government, and to a certain extent, the broader society in the United States have dubbed meatpacking workers as “expendable.” Even before the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, meatpacking was a high-risk job, one of the most dangerous in the United States.¹⁴ At least 80% of

https://www.propublica.org/article/photos-returning-to-guatemala-roots-of-case-farms-workers?token=zpsNH-BUwYJbvg2821z9ljGCWO_Ky9E9; Michael Grabbell, “Sold for Parts,” *ProPublica*, May 1, 2017,
<https://www.propublica.org/article/case-farms-chicken-industry-immigrant-workers-and-american-labor-law?token=XANEa05gbuF0yhe89mXmcppYGT13ObRg>; Michael Grabbell, “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,” *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2017,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/08/exploitation-and-abuse-at-the-chicken-plant>; Grabbell, “Tyson Foods’ Secret Recipe for Carving Up Workers’ Comp,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Mary K. Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,” *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 418–31,
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-015-0292-2>; Peggy Lowe, “Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers,” *NPR*, April 26, 2017,
<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/04/26/525736888/tyson-foods-promises-better-conditions-and-safety-for-meat-workers>.

¹² Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism.”

¹³ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?,”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More,”; Wood et al., “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health.”

¹⁴ This paper does not examine the inhumane and exploitative conditions of the animals processed in these plants or the psychological effect of killing on workers. For more see Heanue, “For

workers are routinely denied bathroom breaks, even when pregnant, causing many to wear diapers while on the line. Cuts, back injuries, falls, exposure to toxins and zoonotic diseases, and cumulative trauma disorders/repetitive stress injuries, such as carpal tunnel and tendonitis, are much more common for meatpacking than in other similar industries. Meatpacking workers have the highest rates of on-the-job injuries resulting in amputations, and injuries in plants are severely underreported. Workers have also been denied prayer breaks.¹⁵

For over thirty years, companies like Tyson have used lobbying and economic power over political officials to craft legislation and appoint or recall judges in the South and Midwest who rule on workers' compensation cases, leaving meatpacking workers with little legal redress. Tyson has changed companies' power over medical care and the burden of proof for workers, leading to injured workers losing benefits. Tyson also self-insures, meaning workers are sent to company nurses and doctors. Across industries, Black workers are less likely than white workers to receive payouts in worker compensation cases. In addition to creating laws hostile to workers, meatpacking companies routinely flout the few existing laws. Children as young as thirteen have been employed in the dangerous work of cleaning slaughterhouses. These workers are exploited and unprotected because they are considered "disposable" under racial capitalism. In some plants, managers had betting pools on how many workers would contract COVID-19. The state decides who is worthy of living and dying.¹⁶

Slaughterhouse Workers, Physical Injuries Are Only the Beginning," and Winders and Abrell, "Slaughterhouse Workers, Animals, and the Environment."

¹⁵ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Chang et al., "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power,"; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, "The Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism,"; Shae Frydenlund and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, "Refugees and Racial Capitalism: Meatpacking and the Primitive Accumulation of Labor," *Political Geography* 95 (May 1, 2022): 1025-75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102575>; Kate Gibson, "Just How Dangerous Is Meat and Poultry Packing?" CBS News, May 27, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/meat-and-poultry-work-is-dangerous-but-not-all-injuries-counted/>; Grabell, "Photos,"; Grabell, "Sold for Parts,"; Grabell, "Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,"; Gurley, "Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says,"; Kim, "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,"; Lowe, "Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers,"; McClure et al., "Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"; Ramos et al., "Invisible No More."

¹⁶ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Chang et al., "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power,"; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, "The

As aforementioned, the meatpacking industry in the United States, by design, is unstable and unable to deal with disruptions. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to production, the corporations and the federal government decided that the best action would be to sacrifice workers, not to disrupt corporate profits. Tyson even ran advertisements arguing that meatpacking was as essential as healthcare. The meatpacking industry argued that they were indispensable to "national security" as the cornerstone of the nation's food system. In the first quarter of 2020, Tyson increased exports to China by 600%. The meatpacking industry positioned itself as indispensable to the food supply and economy and, therefore, exempt from providing adequate worker protections. Meatpacking became a "patriotic duty." The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was framed as threatening meat production, not workers' health and safety. The industry positioned itself as "exceptional" when there is nothing exceptional about racial capitalism. The industry created a false sense of urgency to justify the sacrifice of workers at the altar of capital.¹⁷

The standardized, mechanized, speed-maximizing design of meatpacking plants means that it was virtually impossible to implement basic disease transmission mitigation without a complete redesign, which the corporations were unwilling to do. The meatpacking industry in the United States ignored government warnings about preparing for the COVID-19 pandemic and did not stockpile masks or make any plans to keep workers safe. Plants in China owned

Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism,"; Frydenlund and Dunn, "Refugees and Racial Capitalism,"; Grabell, "Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,"; Grabell, "The Plot to Keep Meatpacking Plants Open During COVID-19,"; Gurley, "Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says,"; Kim, "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,"; Lowe, "Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers,"; McClure et al., "Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"; Wood et al., "The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health."

¹⁷ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Chang et al., "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power,"; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, "The Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism,"; Frydenlund and Dunn, "Refugees and Racial Capitalism,"; Grabell, "The Plot to Keep Meatpacking Plants Open During COVID-19,"; Hendrickson, "Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,"; Kim, "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,"; Loker and Francis, "Urban Food Sovereignty,"; McClure et al., "Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"

by the same companies took precautions. Workers are forced to be close together, and the internal ventilation systems protect the meat from pathogens but not the workers. Additionally, most plants do not provide paid sick leave and make workers stay on the production line while waiting for COVID test results, sometimes even when vomiting. Low-wage workers and their families across industries in the United States, particularly undocumented workers without access to governmental assistance, cannot afford to take time off if they are sick or injured and, in some cases, afford to bury their dead. A lack of sick days extends across industries and predates, leading most low-wage workers to come to work when sick. Companies also underreported cases and deaths, sometimes marking COVID cases as “Flu-like symptoms” or deaths as “resolved cases.”¹⁸

In late April 2020, around 5,000 COVID cases occurred in 115 different meatpacking facilities. Under a highly consolidated system, the closure of even a few plants can disrupt the entire meat production chain. In the past fifty years, there has been a 70% decrease in individual slaughterhouses, while the US population has increased by about 98%, and meat consumption in the US has increased by 40% since 1961. Smaller companies were forced to shut down or be bought out. Currently, 98% of cattle are processed in 50 slaughterhouses. A consolidated meat system has no redundancies or overlapping supports for times of crisis.¹⁹

¹⁸ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Elise Gould and Jessica Schieder, “Work Sick or Lose Pay?: The High Cost of Being Sick When You Don’t Get Paid Sick Days,” Economic Policy Institute, June 28, 2017, <https://www.epi.org/publication/work-sick-or-lose-pay-the-high-cost-of-being-sick-when-you-dont-get-paid-sick-days/>; Grabell, “The Plot to Keep Meatpacking Plants Open During COVID-19,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?,”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More.”

¹⁹ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; “Chapter 4, Population Change in the U.S. and the World from 1950 to 2050,” Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, January 30, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/01/30/chapter-4-population-change-in-the-u-s-and-the-world-from-1950-to-2050/>; 4; Caroline Christen, “Meat Consumption in the U.S. Is Growing at an Alarming Rate,” *Sentient Media*, March 17, 2021, <https://sentientmedia.org/meat-consumption-in-the-us/>; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,”; Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human

Temporary plant closures at the beginning of the pandemic in the United States led to the euthanization and disposal of thousands of animals, particularly cattle and pigs, because the timing for animal producers was off. They could not afford to keep market-ready animals in concentrated animal feedlots and start the cycle with newborn animals. Shutdowns reduced beef and pork processing by 25 to 40%. Under a consolidated food system, it is cheaper for farmers to waste food when there are disruptions.²⁰

In late April 2020, Donald Trump classified meatpacking facilities as critical infrastructure under the Korean War-era Defense Production Act (DPA), forcing plants back open and passing the risk onto workers, not shareholders. This executive order had remarkably similar language to a draft executive order created and proposed by Tyson's legal team. Under the DPA, companies with at least 500 employees are exempt from providing sick days. Workers who refuse to return to work because of unsafe conditions are not eligible for unemployment benefits. In the month following the executive order, 49 workers died from COVID-19.²¹

Local health authorities failed workers and the field of public health, agreeing with corporate PR reps and blaming the workers' "culture of living in close quarters" on high rates of infection instead of systemic racism, low wages, poor housing options, and employers failing to meet basic health and safety standards. One Tyson spokesperson said, "Living circumstances in certain

Experience,"; Loker and Francis, "Urban Food Sovereignty,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"

²⁰ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Chang et al., "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power,"; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, "The Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism,"; Frydenlund and Dunn, "Refugees and Racial Capitalism,"; Fu, "Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?"; Hendrickson, "Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,"; Kim, "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"

²¹ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Chang et al., "The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry's Power,"; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, "The Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism,"; Frydenlund and Dunn, "Refugees and Racial Capitalism,"; Fu, "Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?"; Hendrickson, "Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,"; Hendrickson, "Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,"; Kim, "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"

cultures are different than they are with your traditional American family.”²²

Companies blamed structural issues on racial/ethnic disparities in COVID infection without acknowledging that low wages and lack of occupational health and safety are structural issues. Often, meatpacking workers and their families are not considered “real” members of their communities. Immigrant and refugee workers are simultaneously considered threats and saviors of the food system and economy; either way, their right to safe places to live and work is not taken seriously.²³ Cheap meat requires a continuous supply of cheap labor under constant threat. Meatpacking workers are often victims of racist violence and animosity at local and governmental levels. Racism and xenophobia contribute to the perceived “disposability” of workers.²⁴

In 1999, the Clinton administration enacted a rule to protect workers from repetitive stress injuries, but it was rescinded the following year. In 2001, OSHA stopped collecting data on repetitive stress injuries in the workplace. The Trump administration rolled back many regulations in the meatpacking industry. For example, in 2019, the USDA removed maximum speeds for swine slaughterhouses and beef and poultry plants and shifted inspection responsibilities to corporations. Under Donald Trump, OSHA employed the fewest people since its passage in 1970, leaving 1,815 inspectors for 9.8 million worksites. This

²² Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism.”

²³ Refugee can refer to someone with “official” refugee status granted by a governing body. It is used that way in this essay. There are many refugees fleeing violence, persecution, economic instability, or climate catastrophe that do not have the official documentation but are unable to return to their countries of origin. For example, since the 1980s, many poultry plants have been staffed by Maya people fleeing violence from the US-backed dictatorship Katherine Gaffey, “The Lasting Effects of U.S. Intervention in Guatemala,” *University Honors Theses*, May 21, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.861>; Grabell, “Photos,”; Grabell, “Sold for Parts,”; Grabell, “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant.”

²⁴ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,”; Grabell, “Photos,”; Grabell, “Sold for Parts,”; Grabell, “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,”; Stephen Groves and Sophia Tareen, “U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-05-26/meatpacking-industry-immigrant-undocumented-workers>; Loker and Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty,”; Lowe, “Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers,”; McClure et al., “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?,”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More.”

means there were more than 5,300 workplaces for each inspector, or an average of each workplace inspected every 165 years.²⁵ In the first four months of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the United States, there were almost one hundred complaints to OSHA from meatpacking workers. At this time, there were only thirty OSHA inspections. In one JBS plant, where six workers died in the first few months of the pandemic, it took months for OSHA to show up. By late June of 2020, OSHA had received 5,000 complaints and issued one citation. Even when OSHA ruled that the deaths were due to workplace hazards, the fine was only equivalent to the money that the company makes every sixty seconds. OSHA reported 92 meatpacking worker deaths in 2020, while other estimates are closer to 260.²⁶

Between the 1960s and 1990s, companies shifted from plants in urban areas with a majority native-born workforce to rural areas with a majority foreign-born workforce. Unionized plants in urban areas were closed and moved to states with fewer worker protections. The move made it so that meatpacking plants often became one of the few employers for an entire region. The environmental risk has been shifted from urban areas, where most people live and most meat is consumed, to rural areas with fewer resources and power, a “metabolic rift.” Half of all slaughterhouses in the United States are located in communities with more than 30% of the population below the poverty line. Most people who consume meat are not forced to engage with the immediate environmental impacts or the people who process it. Consolidation of agribusiness has distanced the majority of people in the United States from the majority of the meat production chain. Meatpacking plants and workers are hidden from the public eye, and multiple states have passed laws that criminalize unauthorized photography inside animal processing facilities.²⁷

²⁵ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Krebs, “COVID Cases in Meatpacking Plants Impacted Workers and Their Rural Communities,”; “OSHA’s 30th Anniversary.”

²⁶ Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”

²⁷ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,”; Livia Gershon, “Why Does Meatpacking Have Such Bad Working Conditions?”

The consolidation and movement to rural areas have allowed for a cheap, vulnerable, mostly non-unionized labor pool. The shift was made possible by technological innovations in freezing, long-distance shipping, and the atomization of meatpacking. This period also coincided with the growth of the fast-food industry. With Reaganomics and deregulation in the 1980s, there was a sharp decrease in union membership and power due to industrialization, globalization, strikebreaking, lockouts, and plant closures. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, meatpacking workers were primarily racialized Eastern European immigrants, whose working conditions were described by Upton Sinclair in his book *The Jungle*. By the mid-20th century, the majority of workers were African-American. In the 1940s and 1950s, due to militant, anti-racist labor action of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, approximately 90% of meatpacking workers were protected by a union contract, including 95% of meatpacking workers outside of the South; by 1983, it was 33%, and in 2020 it was 18%.²⁸ In the 1960s, meatpacking had the highest wages in the manufacturing sector. Today, meatpacking has the lowest wages in the manufacturing sector.²⁹

JSTOR Daily, May 8, 2020,

<https://daily.jstor.org/why-does-meatpacking-have-such-bad-working-conditions/>; Grabell, “Sold for Parts,”; Grabell, “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,”; Groves and Tareen, “U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms,”; Gurley, “Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says,”; Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Krebs, “COVID Cases in Meatpacking Plants Impacted Workers and Their Rural Communities,”; Loker and Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?,”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More,”; Anita Waters, “Marx on the Metabolic Rift: How Capitalism Cuts Us off from Nature | MR Online,” *Monthly Review*, October 16, 2019, <https://mronline.org/2019/10/15/marx-on-the-metabolic-rift-how-capitalism-cuts-us-off-from-nature/>; Delcianna J. Winders and Elan Abrell, “Slaughterhouse Workers, Animals, and the Environment,” *Health and Human Rights* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 21–33.

²⁸ National union membership is 10.3%. In 1983 it was 20%, and in 1965 it was 33.3% Ted Van Green, “Majorities of Adults See Decline of Union Membership as Bad for the U.S. and Working People,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/18/majorities-of-adults-see-decline-of-union-membership-as-bad-for-the-u-s-and-working-people/>; Ana Swanson, “The Incredible Decline of American Unions, in One Animated Map,” *Washington Post*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/02/24/the-incredible-decline-of-american-unions-in-one-animated-map/>.

²⁹ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Day, “Conditions in US Meatpacking Plants Today Aren’t Much Better Than They Were in *The Jungle*,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial

In the 1960s and 1970s, the four largest meatpacking companies controlled a quarter of the market. By 1992, they controlled 71% of the market. Between 1982 and 1992, hourly wages in the industry decreased by 15%. Meatpacking companies first recruited from homeless shelters, then from the US-Mexico border, and finally from communities of refugees from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Often, when one ethnic group begins organizing and demanding higher wages, companies look to another group. For example, one plant went from being majority Mexican to majority Somali to majority Rohingya. Today, the meatpacking industry has the fifth-highest concentration of refugee workers. In the 1990s, chicken processing plants began heavily investing in recruiting immigrants as a response to union organizing in the majority African-American native-born workforce. Between 1990 and 2000, the meatpacking workforce that was Hispanic/Latino increased by 24% due to the recruitment of Mexican and Central American workers.³⁰

Today, the meatpacking industry is staffed disproportionately by immigrants and refugees. This is a deliberate strategy to keep wages low. Approximately 80% of meatpacking workers are people of color, and more than half were born outside the United States. Racialized workers are not considered to be deserving of full rights and protections. Latino/Hispanic, Asian, and Black people are overrepresented in the industry and among meatpacking workers who

Capitalism,”; Fu, “Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?”; Gershon, “Why Does Meatpacking Have Such Bad Working Conditions?”; Grabell, “Sold for Parts,”; Grabell, “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,”; Groves and Tareen, “U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms,”; Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Loker and Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”; Wood et al., “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health.”

³⁰ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,”; Fu, “Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?”; Gibson, “Just How Dangerous Is Meat and Poultry Packing?”; Grabell, “Photos,”; Grabell, “Sold for Parts,”; Grabell, “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,”; Groves and Tareen, “U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms,”; Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Lowe, “Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”

contracted COVID-19. Meatpacking workers face multiple vulnerabilities and marginalization in citizenship status, race, and ethnicity. Maintaining a segment of the population that is marginalized and therefore exploitable is essential for the functioning of a capitalist economy.³¹

Employers exploit transnational labor flows to ensure a controllable pool of labor. The shift to employing documented refugees from around the world happened because of increased immigration enforcement in the 2000s. One of the largest immigration raids in the history of the United States took place at a meatpacking facility in Pottsville, Iowa, in 2008. The history of the plant and the raid are typical for the industry. In 1987, Aaron Rubashkin established Agriprocessors Inc., a kosher meat processing plant in Pottsville. The plant was first staffed by Hasidic Jews from New York, then immigrants from Russia, Eastern Europe, and later from Central America, mainly Guatemala. Today, the plant is mainly staffed by Guatemalan and Somali immigrants. The immigration raid was a part of Bush's Operation Endgame, an unsuccessful program to lower the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Close to 20% of Pottsville's population, 389 people, were detained. The raid led to almost half of the population leaving in fear of deportation. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents chased suspected undocumented immigrants with helicopters and trucks, entering private residences and beating those that tried to hide. The raid and detention cost the United States government five million dollars. The raid has been tied to low birth rates for Latina mothers living in the area. The raid was considered a disaster, and large-scale workplace raids were halted until the Trump administration. In 2010, the plant manager and CEO of

³¹ Carrillo and Ipsen, "Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,"; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, "The Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Exceptionalism,"; Frydenlund and Dunn, "Refugees and Racial Capitalism,"; Gibson, "Just How Dangerous Is Meat and Poultry Packing?"; Grabell, "Photos,"; Grabell, "Sold for Parts,"; Grabell, "Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant,"; Groves and Tareen, "U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms,"; Gurley, "Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says,"; Kim, "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,"; Krebs, "COVID Cases in Meatpacking Plants Impacted Workers and Their Rural Communities,"; Lowe, "Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers,"; McClure et al., "Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,"; Montenegro de Wit, "What Grows from a Pandemic?"; Ramos et al., "Invisible No More."

Agriprocessors Inc., and son of the founder, Sholom Rubashkin, was tried and convicted of eighty-six counts of financial fraud and sentenced to twenty-seven years in prison. In December 2017, his sentence was commuted by Donald Trump at the urging of Jared and Charles Kushner.³²

Refugees are still vulnerable and unlikely to know US labor law or be willing to assert their rights. Refugee workers have similar vulnerabilities to undocumented workers, with few options for work in other industries, but have the legal ability to work. Many refugee communities also have trauma from state violence and come from minority language, ethnic, and religious groups, making them unlikely to report their employers and have difficulty organizing and striking. Today, between 10 and 90% of meatpacking workers are undocumented.³³ These workers are constantly threatened by deportation, making organizing and asserting labor rights difficult. Additionally, while undocumented workers have the legal right to complain about labor violations, companies have no legal obligation to rehire or pay back wages to workers who are fired illegally.³⁴

The decision to not protect meatpacking workers impacts the public health of entire communities. Meatpacking workers are not isolated. Workers who

³² Courtney Crowder and MacKenzie Elmer, “Postville Raid Anniversary: A Timeline of Events in One of America’s Largest Illegal Immigration Campaigns,” *The Des Moines Register*, May 10, 2018,

<https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/2018/05/10/postville-raid-anniversary-timeline-aaron-rubashkin-agriprocessors-postville-iowa-immigration-raid/588025002/>; Alice Speri, “Film: How a Brutal Immigration Raid Devastated an American Small Town — and How It Bounced Back,” *The Intercept*, July 14, 2018,

<https://theintercept.com/2018/07/14/immigration-raid-ice-postville-iowa/>.

³³ It is difficult to ascertain the actual number of undocumented workers as it varies from plant to plant, and many workers are using documents of “authorized” workers. Many estimate it is greater than 50%. Jonathan Feinstein and Edward Kaplan, “Why Hidden Populations Are So Hard to Count,” *Yale Insights*, December 13, 2018,

<https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/why-hidden-populations-are-so-hard-to-count/>; Grabell, “Photos,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience.”

³⁴ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,”; Grabell, “Tyson Foods’ Secret Recipe for Carving Up Workers’ Comp,”; Grabell, “Photos,”; Groves and Tareen, “U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms,”; Gurley, “Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?,”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More.”

contracted COVID-19 often passed it on to their friends and families, who were deemed “expendable.” Meatpacking plants were the sites of some of the first widespread COVID-19 outbreaks in the US. One-third of slaughterhouses are in communities that are 30% or more people of color. Often, surges in meatpacking plants preceded surges in nursing homes and prisons in the local area. Nursing homes, like meatpacking plants, disproportionately employ low-income, immigrant people of color. By contrast, the infection rate for medical doctors is similar to that of the general population. In the summer of 2020, meatpacking workers were more likely than workers in any other industry to contract COVID. When comparing rural counties with and without meatpacking plants, the former had an infection rate almost five times higher, demonstrating the immense public health impact. By July 2020, conditions in meatpacking plants led to 5,000 additional COVID deaths and a quarter of a million additional cases. In one meatpacking county in Wisconsin, the Latino/Hispanic population was around 9%, but 60% of COVID cases were in Latino/Hispanic people. Consolidation, deregulation, and a complete lack of labor protections have created a public health crisis.³⁵

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has demonstrated that meatpacking facilities are “sacrifice zones”: “worksites where laborers are forced to bear potentially fatal socio-ecological risks.”³⁶ Other workers forced into these “sacrifice zones” include grocery store workers, delivery drivers, and farm workers, industries that, while essential to the provisioning society, are systemically devalued and disproportionately staffed by immigrants, people of color, and women, and under-unionized with few legal protections. These workers were considered

³⁵ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Chang et al., “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; Krebs, “COVID Cases in Meatpacking Plants Impacted Workers and Their Rural Communities,”; Loker and Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty,”; McClure et al., “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?,”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More,”; Winders and Abrell, “Slaughterhouse Workers, Animals, and the Environment,”; Wood et al., “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health.”

³⁶ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones.”

“essential” or “heroic” and expendable. While this is far from the only industry where this exists, meatpacking workers’ multiple vulnerabilities to SARS-CoV-2 illustrate the structural instability of the modern food supply chain as a food security, public health, environmental, and labor crisis.³⁷

Joe Biden devoted one billion dollars of the 1.9 trillion dollar American Rescue Plan to diversify the meat market in the United States, intending to reduce the price of meat for consumers. For perspective, 350 billion dollars from the act went to funding police departments, jails, and courts. The plan includes money for subsidies, loans, and grants to smaller plants, worker training, and research and development. The Biden administration did not offer a plan to enforce anti-consolidation and antitrust laws.³⁸ The Packyards and Stockyards Act was passed in 1921 by Congress to combat anti-competitive practices in the meat industry, such as price manipulation. The Obama administration used the act to enact regulations that would give farmers and ranchers an avenue for legal redress against large meatpacking corporations. The Obama-era reforms were rolled back by the Trump administration. In June 2021, the USDA announced that it would be reinstated, but there has been very little tangible progress aside from a “tip line” for ranchers to complain to the USDA and Department of Justice. Effective anti-trust policies can improve public health and worker and consumer protections.³⁹ The U.S. government is unwilling and unable to regulate corporations at even the most basic level.

³⁷ Carrillo and Ipsen, “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones,”; Dempsey, Zoller, and Hunt, “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism,”; Frydenlund and Dunn, “Refugees and Racial Capitalism,”; Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Kim, “Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience,”; McClure et al., “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”; Ramos et al., “Invisible No More,”; Wood et al., “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health.”

³⁸ Fu, “Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?”; Anastasia Valeeva, Weihua Li, and Susie Cagle, “Rifles, Tasers and Jails: How Cities and States Spent Billions of COVID-19 Relief,” The Marshall Project, September 7, 2022, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/09/07/how-federal-covid-relief-flows-to-the-criminal-justice-system>.

³⁹ Fu, “Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?”; Wood et al., “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health.”

Climate change and a growing population present challenges to provisioning the modern city. The current consolidated food system cannot meet these challenges.⁴⁰ COVID is not the last pandemic or disruption the food system will have to contend with. It is predicted that the current system of consolidated animal farming will lead to even more “superbugs” and outbreaks.⁴¹ Meatpacking and other agribusiness corporations have proven dangerous to the nation's and the world's health. The meatpacking industry is harmful on many levels, and its political power and treatment of workers are just one manifestation of racial capitalism. Capitalism requires surplus labor.⁴² The system of power is inherently exploitative, unequal, and unable to provision the modern city effectively. Meatpacking workers were left to die because the government and corporations viewed them as disposable and without power. The consolidated food system in the United States is not resilient. Moving to a more diversified food and economic system where necessities were treated as public goods and regulated would help create a more resilient food system and a healthier world for consumers, workers, and the environment.

⁴⁰ Hendrickson, “Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Hendrickson, “Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System,”; Loker and Francis, “Urban Food Sovereignty.”

⁴¹ Devi Sridhar, “Covid Won’t Be the Last Pandemic. Will We Be Better Prepared for the next One?” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/24/covid-pandemic-prepared-investment-science>; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”

⁴² Derek Ford and Mazda Majidi, “Surplus Value Is the Class Struggle: An Introduction,” *Liberation School*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.liberationschool.org/03-what-is-surplus-value-html/>; McClure et al., “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,”; Montenegro de Wit, “What Grows from a Pandemic?”

Bibliography

- Anderson, Norman B., Rodolfo A. Bulatao, Barney Cohen, and Ethnicity National Research Council (US) Panel on Race. “Racial and Ethnic Identification, Official Classifications, and Health Disparities. Critical Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Differences in Health in Late Life.” *National Academies Press* (2004). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK25522/>.
- Arroyo, Magdalena. “Why ‘Hispanic/Latino’ Isn’t a Racial Category on the U.S. Census.” *IDEALS Institute*, University of Arkansas, August 31, 2020. <https://ideals.uark.edu/why-hispanic-latino-isnt-a-racial-category-on-the-u-s-census/>.
- Blocker, Kati. “Is RSV Contagious? Everything You Need to Know About This Virus.” *UCHealth Today*, October 29, 2021. <https://www.uchealth.org/today/how-long-is-rsv-contagious-get-facts-about-this-virus/>.
- Carrillo, Ian R., and Annabel Ipsen. “Worksites as Sacrifice Zones: Structural Precarity and COVID-19 in U.S. Meatpacking.” *Sociological Perspectives* 64, no. 5 (October 1, 2021): 726–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214211012025>.
- Chang, Alvin, Michael Sainato, Nina Lakhani, Rashida Kamal, and Aliya Uteuova. “The Pandemic Exposed the Human Cost of the Meatpacking Industry’s Power: ‘It’s Enormously Frightening.’” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/16/meatpacking-industry-covid-outbreaks-workers>.
- Christen, Caroline. “Meat Consumption in the U.S. Is Growing at an Alarming Rate.” *Sentient Media*, March 17, 2021. <https://sentientmedia.org/meat-consumption-in-the-us/>.
- Crowder, Courtney, and MacKenzie Elmer. “Potsville Raid Anniversary: A Timeline of Events in One of America’s Largest Illegal Immigration Campaigns.” *The Des Moines Register*, May 10, 2018. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/2018/05/10/>

postville-raid-anniversary-timeline-aaron-rubashkin-agriprocessors-postville-iowa-immigration-raid/588025002/.

Day, Megan. “Conditions in US Meatpacking Plants Today Aren’t Much Better Than They Were in The Jungle.” *Jacobin*, May 8, 2020.

<https://jacobin.com/2020/05/meatpacking-plants-upton-sinclair-jungle-coronavirus>.

Dempsey, Sarah E., Heather M. Zoller, and Kathleen P. Hunt. “The Meatpacking Industry’s Corporate Exceptionalism: Racialized Logics of Food Chain Worker Disposability during the COVID-19 Crisis.” *Food, Culture & Society* 0, no. 0 (February 2, 2022): 1–20.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.2022916>.

Dong, Xiao. “USDA ERS - Higher Retail Meat Prices Reduced Household Economic Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Department of Agriculture. October 3, 2022.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2022/october/higher-retail-meat-prices-reduced-household-economic-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

Douglas, Leah. “Nearly 90% of Big US Meat Plants Had COVID-19 Cases in Pandemic’s First Year - Data.” *Reuters*, January 14, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/nearly-90-big-us-meat-plants-had-covid-19-cases-pandemics-first-year-data-2022-01-14/>.

Feinstein, Jonathan, and Edward Kaplan. “Why Hidden Populations Are So Hard to Count.” *Yale Insights*, December 13, 2018.

<https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/why-hidden-populations-are-so-hard-to-count>.

Ford, Derek, and Mazda Majidi. “Surplus Value Is the Class Struggle: An Introduction.” *Liberation School*, March 30, 2021.

<https://www.liberationschool.org/03-what-is-surplus-value-html/>.

Frydenlund, Shae, and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn. “Refugees and Racial Capitalism: Meatpacking and the Primitive Accumulation of Labor.” *Political Geography* 95 (May 1, 2022): 1025-75.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102575>.

Fu, Jessica. “Can \$1 Billion Really Fix a Meat Industry Dominated by Just Four Companies?” *The Counter*, January 5, 2022.

<https://thecounter.org/big-four-meatpackers-antitrust-consolidation/>.

Gaffey, Katherine. “The Lasting Effects of U.S. Intervention in Guatemala.” *University Honors Theses*, May 21, 2020.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.861>.

Gershon, Livia. “Why Does Meatpacking Have Such Bad Working Conditions?” *JSTOR Daily*, May 8, 2020.

<https://daily.jstor.org/why-does-meatpacking-have-such-bad-working-conditions/>.

Gibson, Kate. “Just How Dangerous Is Meat and Poultry Packing?” *CBS News*, May 27, 2016.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/meat-and-poultry-work-is-dangerous-but-not-all-injuries-counted/>.

Gould, Elise, and Jessica Schieder. “Work Sick or Lose Pay?: The High Cost of Being Sick When You Don’t Get Paid Sick Days.” *Economic Policy Institute*, June 28, 2017.

<https://www.epi.org/publication/work-sick-or-lose-pay-the-high-cost-of-being-sick-when-you-dont-get-paid-sick-days/>.

Grabell, Michael. “Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant.” *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2017.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/08/exploitation-and-abuse-at-the-chicken-plant>.

———. “Photos: Returning to the Roots of Case Farms’ Workforce.” *ProPublica*, May 1, 2017.

https://www.propublica.org/article/photos-returning-to-guatemala-roots-of-case-farms-workers?token=zpsNH-BUwYJbvg2821z9IjGCWO_Ky9E9.

———. “Sold for Parts.” *ProPublica*, May 1, 2017.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/case-farms-chicken-industry-immigrant-workers-and-american-labor-law?token=XANEa05gbuF0yhe89mXmcpp>

YGT13ObRg.

- . “The Plot to Keep Meatpacking Plants Open During COVID-19.” *ProPublica*, May 13, 2021.
<https://www.propublica.org/article/documents-covid-meatpacking-tyson-s-mithfield-trump>.
- . “Tyson Foods’ Secret Recipe for Carving Up Workers’ Comp.” *ProPublica*, December 11, 2015.
<https://www.propublica.org/article/tyson-foods-secret-recipe-for-carving-up-workers-comp>.
- Green, Ted Van. “Majorities of Adults See Decline of Union Membership as Bad for the U.S. and Working People.” *Pew Research Center*. Accessed November 22, 2022.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/18/majorities-of-adults-see-decline-of-union-membership-as-bad-for-the-u-s-and-working-people/>.
- Groves, Stephen, and Sophia Tareen. “U.S. Meatpacking Industry Relies on Immigrant Workers. But a Labor Shortage Looms.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2020.
<https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-05-26/meatpacking-industry-immigrant-undocumented-workers>.
- Gurley, Lauren Kaori. “Dozens of Youths Illegally Employed to Clean Meat Plants, Labor Dept. Says.” *Washington Post*, November 11, 2022.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/11/10/youth-workers-meat-packing/>.
- Han, Qing, Bang Zheng, Luke Daines, and Aziz Sheikh. “Long-Term Sequelae of COVID-19: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of One-Year Follow-Up Studies on Post-COVID Symptoms.” *Pathogens* 11, no. 2 (February 19, 2022): 269. <https://doi.org/10.3390/pathogens11020269>.
- Heanue, Oscar. “For Slaughterhouse Workers, Physical Injuries Are Only the Beginning.” *Onlabor*, January 17, 2022.
<https://onlabor.org/for-slaughterhouse-workers-physical-injuries-are-only-the-beginning>.

- Hendrickson, Mary K. "Covid Lays Bare the Brittleness of a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System." *Agriculture and Human Values* 37, no. 3 (2020): 579–80. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10092-y>.
- . "Resilience in a Concentrated and Consolidated Food System." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 418–31. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-015-0292-2>.
- Hill, Latoya, and Samantha Artiga. "COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by Race/Ethnicity: Current Data and Changes Over Time." *KFF*, August 22, 2022. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/covid-19-cases-and-deaths-by-race-ethnicity-current-data-and-changes-over-time/>.
- Hu, Ben, Hua Guo, Peng Zhou, and Zheng-Li Shi. "Characteristics of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19." *Nature Reviews Microbiology* 19, no. 3 (March 2021): 141–54. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41579-020-00459-7>.
- Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. "COVID-19 Map," 2023. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.
- Kim, Jae Young. "Expanding the Constructs of Grief and Loss in Capturing the Human Experience: Essential Workers in the Meatpacking Industry and the Pandemic." *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 53, no. 1 (February 2022): 90. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000432>.
- Krebs, Natalie. "COVID Cases in Meatpacking Plants Impacted Workers and Their Rural Communities." *NPR*, December 24, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/24/1067775073/covid-cases-in-meatpacking-plants-impacted-workers-and-their-rural-communities>.
- Kupferschmidt, Kai. "Why Do Some COVID-19 Patients Infect Many Others, Whereas Most Don't Spread the Virus at All?" *Science*, May 19, 2020. <https://www.science.org/content/article/why-do-some-covid-19-patients-infect-many-others-whereas-most-don-t-spread-virus-all>.
- Loker, Ali, and Charles Francis. "Urban Food Sovereignty: Urgent Need for Agroecology and Systems Thinking in a Post-COVID-19 Future." *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 44, no. 9 (October 20, 2020):

1118–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2020.1775752>.

Lowe, Peggy. “Tyson Foods Promises Better Conditions And Safety For Meat Workers.” *NPR*, April 26, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/04/26/525736888/tyson-foods-promises-better-conditions-and-safety-for-meat-workers>.

McClure, Elizabeth S, Pavithra Vasudevan, Zinzi Bailey, Snehal Patel, and Whitney R Robinson. “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health—How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities.” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 189, no. 11 (July 3, 2020): 1244–53.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa126>.

Montenegro de Wit, Maywa. “What Grows from a Pandemic? Toward an Abolitionist Agroecology.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 99–136.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1854741>.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration, United States Department of Labor. “OSHA’s 30th Anniversary,” Spring 2001.

<https://www.osha.gov/aboutosha/30-years>.

Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project. “Chapter 4. Population Change in the U.S. and the World from 1950 to 2050,” January 30, 2014.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/01/30/chapter-4-population-change-in-the-u-s-and-the-world-from-1950-to-2050/>.

Pitlik, Silvio Daniel. “COVID-19 Compared to Other Pandemic Diseases.”

Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal 11, no. 3 (July 31, 2020): e0027.

<https://doi.org/10.5041/RMMJ.10418>.

Ramos, Athena K., Abigail E. Lowe, Jocelyn J. Herstein, Shelly Schwedhelm, Kelly K. Dineen, and John J. Lowe. “Invisible No More: The Impact of COVID-19 on Essential Food Production Workers.” *Journal of Agromedicine* 25, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 378–82.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2020.1814925>.

Salamanna, Francesca, Melania Maglio, Maria Paola Landini, and Milena Fini.

“Body Localization of ACE-2: On the Trail of the Keyhole of

SARS-CoV-2.” *Frontiers in Medicine* 7 (2020).

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmed.2020.594495>.

Speri, Alice. “Film: How a Brutal Immigration Raid Devastated an American Small Town — and How It Bounced Back.” *The Intercept*, July 14, 2018.

<https://theintercept.com/2018/07/14/immigration-raid-ice-postville-iowa/>.

Sridhar, Devi. “Covid Won’t Be the Last Pandemic. Will We Be Better Prepared for the next One?” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/24/covid-pandemic-prepared-investment-science>.

Swanson, Ana. “The Incredible Decline of American Unions, in One Animated Map.” *Washington Post*, November 25, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/work/wp/2015/02/24/the-incredible-decline-of-american-unions-in-one-animated-map/>.

Timmons, Heather. “U.S. Poor Died at Much Higher Rate from COVID than Rich, Report Says.” *Reuters*, April 4, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-poor-died-much-higher-rate-covid-than-rich-report-2022-04-04/>.

Valeeva, Anastasia, Weihua Li, and Susie Cagle. “Rifles, Tasers and Jails: How Cities and States Spent Billions of COVID-19 Relief.” The Marshall Project, September 7, 2022.

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/09/07/how-federal-covid-relief-funds-to-the-criminal-justice-system>.

Ward, Vicky. “The inside Story of How a Kosher Meat Kingpin Won Clemency under Trump | CNN Politics.” CNN, August 9, 2019.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/09/politics/kushner-rubashkin-trump-clemency/index.html>.

Waters, Anita. “Marx on the Metabolic Rift: How Capitalism Cuts Us off from Nature | MR Online.” *Monthly Review*, October 16, 2019.

<https://mronline.org/2019/10/15/marx-on-the-metabolic-rift-how-capitalism-cuts-us-off-from-nature/>.

Winders, Delcianna J., and Elan Abrell. “Slaughterhouse Workers, Animals, and

the Environment.” *Health and Human Rights* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 21–33.

Wood, Benjamin, Owain Williams, Phil Baker, Vijaya Nagarajan, and Gary Sacks. “The Influence of Corporate Market Power on Health: Exploring the Structure-Conduct-Performance Model from a Public Health Perspective.” *Globalization and Health* 17 (April 6, 2021): 41.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00688-2>.