

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105104](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2016 and 2017, GAO reported that meat and poultry workers faced multiple occupational hazards. OSHA is responsible for ensuring worker safety and health, FSIS is responsible for ensuring the safety of meat and poultry products, and employers are responsible for providing safe and healthful workplaces.

The CARES Act includes a provision to monitor and report on the federal pandemic response. GAO also was asked to review federal efforts to ensure meat and poultry worker safety and health during the pandemic.

This report examines (1) meat and poultry companies' response to the pandemic and how the pandemic affected these workers; (2) OSHA's enforcement actions and associated challenges; and (3) OSHA and FSIS collaboration on worker safety. GAO surveyed companies, analyzed OSHA inspection data from February 2018 through June 2022—the most recent available at the time; reviewed federal laws and regulations; and spoke to workers from nine states with large meat and poultry processing operations. GAO also compared OSHA and FSIS actions to leading practices for interagency collaboration, and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OSHA assess the actions needed—such as an industry standard—to protect meat and poultry workers; and that OSHA and FSIS follow leading collaboration practices. OSHA stated it would respond to the recommendations after the report is issued. FSIS agreed with the recommendation to collaborate.

View [GAO-23-105104](#). For more information, contact Thomas Costa at (202) 512-4769 or CostaT@gao.gov.

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MEAT AND POULTRY WORKER SAFETY

OSHA Should Determine How to Address Persistent Hazards Exacerbated by COVID-19

What GAO Found

Companies reported taking steps to address COVID-19 in response to federal guidance. Most of the 15 companies responding to GAO's survey said they encouraged distancing in communal areas, installed barriers, and required masks. However, studies, federal inspections, and worker interviews suggest that meat and poultry workers continued to face high risk of infection in the first year of the pandemic. For example, in 2020, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) found that COVID-19 risk to workers at one large meat plant was more than 70 times higher than to the state's general population.

Plastic Sheeting between Poultry Workers Standing in Close Proximity



Source: National Chicken Council. | GAO-23-105104

OSHA increased meat and poultry plant inspections in the first year of the pandemic, but faced enforcement challenges. Officials told GAO their ability to protect workers was limited because existing standards did not target COVID-related hazards, such as jobs requiring workers to stand in close proximity. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 permits OSHA to develop safety and health standards for specific industries. OSHA is developing an infectious disease standard for healthcare workers, but not for workers in meat and poultry processing. Without assessing the actions needed to better protect meat and poultry workers—such as assessing the need for an industry standard—OSHA may be missing an opportunity to protect workers.

OSHA and Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) officials said they met regularly during the pandemic, but did not provide documentation on whether they addressed worker safety. The agencies reported little field-level collaboration among staff with direct knowledge of plant conditions. In August 2022, the agencies updated their 1994 memorandum of understanding, which states that FSIS should report hazards to OSHA, including infectious diseases. The agencies did not follow some leading collaboration practices, such as defining outcomes and including key participants. By following these practices, OSHA and FSIS could better collaborate on meat and poultry worker safety.