Language Barriers to Health Care: The Case of Hispanic Construction Workers

The Impact of Language Barriers on Healthcare Utilization among Hispanic Construction Workers

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Overview

Despite a decline during the recent economic downturn, Hispanic workers accounted for about one-quarter of the construction workforce in 2010. Given the hazards construction workers face, access to healthcare is essential. Yet many Hispanic construction workers are much less likely to use healthcare services than their white, non-Hispanic counterparts. Although healthcare disparities suffered by Hispanics are well-documented, Hispanics are a heterogeneous population, and single-item measures may be inadequate to explain determinants of healthcare utilization. This study uses nationally representative data from the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. CPWR researchers target Hispanic construction workers with limited English proficiency (LEP) and examine whether language is an additional barrier to healthcare utilization when other barriers are present (e.g., poverty, lack of insurance coverage).

Key Findings

- More than 80% of Hispanic construction workers did not speak English at home; furthermore, 37% of Hispanic construction workers did not speak English very well or did not speak English at all.
- About 89% of Hispanics with limited English proficiency (LEP) were uninsured, compared with 56% of Hispanics with English proficiency (EP) and 22% of non-Hispanic whites.
- Only 24% of LEP Hispanics contacted a physician in the past 12 months compared to 39% of EP Hispanics and 64% of non-Hispanic whites.
- Even after accounting for insurance coverage, health status, age, and income, English proficiency was significantly associated with healthcare utilization.
- Language barriers increased health disparities among Hispanic construction workers. To improve healthcare among those with LEP, decision makers should target ways to diminish or mitigate language barriers to healthcare utilization.

For more information, contact:
Sue Dong: sdong@cpwr.com

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