

U.S. NEWS

Pinched Workers Seek Out Day Labor

High Joblessness Forces More People From Desk Jobs to Curb-Side Hiring Sites; a Bank Teller Takes Up Housecleaning

By MARIE C. BACA

The face of day labor appears to be changing, with more women, non-Latinos and former white-collar workers taking up manual labor.

Amid continued high joblessness, employers say they are seeing more workers at curbside hiring sites, or seeking work through less traditional routes such as Craigslist, who before the downturn might have had full-time jobs.

Many lost desk jobs in the hard-hit auto, construction and financial industries. Some see manual labor such as housecleaning or hauling debris, where people are hired and paid per diem, as the only way to survive when jobs in their prior fields have become scarce. Such work is often a last resort, because day jobs often offer no benefits such as health insurance or a guarantee of a steady job.

Data on the day-labor market are scarce because of the sector's informal nature, and because some experts differ on how to define day labor. But leading researchers and providers of services to such workers agree that their numbers—especially first-timers—have risen.

The new day laborers include single mother of two Debbie Helms, 34 years old, of Akron, Ohio, a former bank teller who began cleaning homes a year ago. Her clients, who usually offer her \$7 an hour, change on a day-to-day basis.

Juan Luis Ortega, 39, of Mountain View, Calif., was laid off in June from his behind-the-counter job at a car dealership and now does yard work and other manual labor. College graduate Ryan Bherns in Wayzata, Minn., said he works whenever possible as a mover because his scaled-back hours as a substitute teacher aren't enough to pay his bills.

"It's a weird time for me and a lot of other people," said Mr. Bherns, 30.

Nik Theodore, director of the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is launching a national study of day-laborer hiring



Day laborers often connect with employers at curbside hiring sites, with people congregating around supermarkets and chain hardware stores, such as this Home Depot in Los Angeles.

ing sites. He focuses on workers who seek jobs at such sites, while other experts define day laborers as anyone who is hired and paid for manual labor by the day.

Mr. Theodore said he expects to find an increase in the size and diversity of the day-laborer population, including gender, ethnicity and employment history. In 2006, he was a co-author of a study that estimated the nationwide population of day laborers at 117,600, largely dominated by undocumented male Latino immigrants.

The increase in diversity is "definitely a national trend," said Pablo Alvarado, executive director of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network in Los

Angeles, a day-labor activist group. He said the increase in female day laborers has been particularly noticeable at formal and informal hiring sites.

Mr. Alvarado also noted that the types of jobs available to day workers has changed significantly over the past few years. While construction companies once supplied fairly consistent work to many laborers, the fall of the housing industry has triggered more unemployed individuals to seek out day labor while removing a major source of income from the day labor market.

Now most work available to day laborers consists of moving and landscaping jobs that last only for a few hours, he said.

Day laborers often connect with employers at curbside hiring sites, with people congregating around large chain hardware stores and supermarkets, waiting for someone to pull up and offer a day's—or even a few hours'—work. At Chavez Supermarket in Redwood City, Calif., assistant manager Omar Flores said the number of people seeking per diem work outside the store has grown over the past year to 30 a day from 20, many of whom he has never seen before.

Such increases come as several cities have restricted day labor in an attempt to deter illegal immigration or eliminate informal hiring sites in busy areas.

In June, the U.S. Ninth Circuit

Court of Appeals upheld an ordinance in Redondo Beach, Calif.—modeled on one in Phoenix—prohibiting day laborers from soliciting work from passing cars. Officials in Stockton, Calif., said they are considering an ordinance to make it illegal to solicit employment on the city's streets.

The ordinances have sparked opposition from civil-rights groups, which say such restrictions violate the laborers' free-speech rights. But Redondo Beach City Attorney Michael Webb said the laws are necessary to ensure safe traffic flow and prevent the growth of an underground economy.

At the Day Worker Center in Mountain View, executive direc-

tor Maria Marroquin said the number of first-time laborers seeking jobs through the formal hiring center has doubled to an average of 10 a day over the past year, especially as local car dealerships close or downsize.

She said the new laborers are often surprised at the pace of the day labor-hiring process, in which jobs are distributed based on skill sets and the length of time since the laborer's last job. At her center, some laborers wait a week or more before a job becomes available.

"If you're new, your name is going to be at the bottom" of the 70-person waiting list, Ms. Marroquin said. "People can get very discouraged."

Probes Find Energy Meters Accurate, Service Lacking

By REBECCA SMITH

A four-month investigation spurred by a surge in energy-bill complaints found new smart meters installed in Northern California by PG&E Corp. are accurately measuring energy use.

But the probe found that some utilities are falling down in the way they handle customer complaints and monitor data transmitted by the new digital meters.

The report, issued Thursday by the California Public Utilities Commission, is the second major report released this summer prompted by a surge in complaints that blame digital meters for high bills and other problems.

Although the new digital meters being installed by PG&E's utility, Pacific Gas and Electric Co., are accurate, consultants hired by the commission to investigate the matter faulted the firm for doing too little to educate customers about the switch and for failing to respond to the full suite of data it gets from the meters.

The Structure Consulting Group LLC, the energy consultants hired by the commission, said it tested 611 of PG&E's advanced meters, which were made by Landis+Gyr, and found that all met industry standards for accuracy.

The industry standard requires meters to be accurate to plus or minus 2%, meaning us-

age must be recorded within a band that is 98% to 102% of the amount actually used.

It found that the electromechanical meters that are being replaced are less reliable than new digital meters. Of the 147 old meters tested, accuracy was 96%.

Over time, old electromechanical meters tend to run slower, resulting in lower customer bills. Naturally, low bills are less likely to prompt complaints than high bills.

Unlike old meters that are read by a meter reader, typically monthly, the new digital meters wirelessly transmit readings to utilities throughout the day. This allows utilities to charge different prices for power, at different

times. Smart meters are integral to state and national efforts to drive down energy use and reduce pollution from power plants. Texas and California have made the biggest push to digital meters.

The California findings were generally in line with the findings of a similar report, issued on July 30, by consultants hired by utility regulators in Texas.

Regulators in Texas noticed a surge in complaints that mostly were directed against a single utility company in the northern part of the state, **Oncor**.

The consultant used by Texas regulators, Navigant Consulting, tested far more meters—5,600 digital meters in Texas versus about 600 in California—but

reached a similar conclusion that new meters are more accurate than the meters they replace.

The consulting firms reported that PG&E and Oncor were receiving trouble reports from meters, wirelessly, that appeared to be going unheeded. Thus, the consultants concluded meter malfunctions could happen and not result in timely corrective action.

Both Oncor and PG&E said they intend to learn from the independent assessments and are making improvements in their processes.

Helen Burt, senior vice president and chief customer officer for Pacific Gas and Electric, said the utility has made mistakes in how it has handled its massive

deployment of 9.3 million new electric and gas meters.

"We approached it as a roll out of infrastructure," she said in an interview.

"The plan all along for outreach was to send customers a letter at installation" telling them they were getting a new meter but not providing additional details or making the case for why the switch was beneficial, Ms. Burt said.

She said the utility failed to understand the depth of skepticism about the need for new technology, privacy concerns with transmitting data wirelessly, as well as fear, in some quarters, about possible health effects from wireless radio transmissions.

U.S. WATCH

◆ TEXAS

Tropical Storm Hermine Heads Toward Gulf Coast

Officials in Texas distributed sandbags and warned of flash floods as Tropical Storm Hermine headed toward the northwestern Gulf coast on Monday.

It is the second major storm to hit the area this season. Hurricane Alex roared ashore there in June, killing at least 12 people as remnant rains drenched a wide swath of northeastern Mexico for days.

Hermine touched land late Monday in Mexico, about 40 miles south of Brownsville, Texas, according to the National Hurricane Center in Miami. The storm was expected to move into south Texas, bringing as much as a foot of rainfall.

A hurricane watch was issued for the area from Rio San Fernando, Mexico, northward to Baffin Bay in Texas.

On the Texas coast, emergency officials readied pumping equipment and distributed sandbags in Cameron County, said John Cavazos, the county's emergency management coordinator.

He said officials were worried about flooding because the ground was already saturated from earlier rains. Some areas could get up to 12 inches of rain, Mr. Cavazos said.

Frank Torres, emergency management coordinator for Willacy County, said officials were preparing sandbags and making sure people knew a storm was coming.

"It just popped up out of nowhere," he said.

Associated Press

◆ ARKANSAS

One of 'Little Rock Nine' Who Integrated School Dies

Jefferson Thomas, who as a teenager was among nine black students to integrate a Little Rock high school in the nation's first major battle over school segregation, has died. He was 68 years old.

Mr. Thomas died Sunday in Ohio of pancreatic cancer, according to a statement from Carlotta Walls LaNier, who also enrolled at Central High School in 1957 and is president of the Little Rock Nine Foundation. The integration fight was a first real test of the federal government's resolve to enforce a 1954 Supreme Court order outlawing racial

segregation in the nation's public schools.

After Democratic Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus sent National Guard troops to block Mr. Thomas and eight other students from entering Central High, President Dwight Eisenhower ordered in the Army's 101st Airborne Division.

Soldiers stood in the school hallways and escorted each of the

nine students as they went from classroom to classroom.

Each of the Little Rock Nine received Congressional Gold Medals shortly after the 40th anniversary of their enrollment. In Central High

President Bill Clinton presented the medals in 1999 to Mr. Thomas, Ms. LaNier, Melba Pattillo Beals, Minnijean Trickey Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Gloria Ray

Karlmark, Terrence Roberts and Thelma Mothershed Wair.

Associated Press

◆ IOWA

Skydiver Killed After Gust Of Wind Deflates Parachute

A man was killed after his parachute collapsed during a skydive at the Fort Dodge Regional Airport.

Julio Cesar Velez Correa, 27 years old, of Puerto Rico, was killed at around 11:17 a.m. Sunday after a gust of wind caused the left side of his parachute to fall in on itself around 100 feet from the ground as he was preparing to land after completing a skydive with eight other jumpers, said Steve Lawyer, representative of the Des Moines Skydivers.

Mr. Correa's parachute didn't reinflate in time, and he struck the ground on his left shoulder and head, surviving briefly after the accident before he died.

"It's a sobering experience," Mr. Lawyer said. "But as skydivers we know the risks we face and he did as well."

Mr. Lawyer said there wasn't anything unusual about the skydive leading up to the event, and that all of Mr. Correa's gear and safety equipment functioned properly.

The wind speed at the time of the incident was around 12 miles per hour with gusts up to 22 miles per hour, which is within the margin of safety, Mr. Lawyer said.

Mr. Correa has been skydiving for approximately four years and held a United States Parachute Association class A license.

He had made a total of 346 skydives.

Associated Press



A single-engine airplane crashed on a street in Henderson, Nev. on Monday. One person on the plane was killed and three others injured.