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Changing the Stereotype of Roughnecks

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Roughnecks get a bum rap. That's the message from Angela C. Angel, MSc, who is working with work camp provider Target Logistics to end the stereotype that many people have about the workers – generally male – who work to secure hydrocarbon resources around the globe.

The popular image of a roughneck – an image frequently repeated in movies and in the media – is of a hard-driving guy in his 20s who lives a reckless, risk-taking existence associated with substance abuse, traffic violations and bar fights, Angel said in a white paper for Target Logistics. That stereotype is not only far from the truth, but it is also harmful.

So, what are the facts regarding oilfield workers? According to data from the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo in the Alberta Oil Sands, more than half of roughnecks surveyed are married or are in common-law relationships. More than 61 percent are either apprentices, or they have post-secondary degrees or certificates in the trades. Only 7.4 percent have less than a high school diploma. And, more than 17 percent are female, Angel said.

New data is being compiled for workers in North Dakota's Bakken Shale Formation. However, early indications are that most of the workers in the Bakken are men with a spouse and children at home. The average age of these workers is in the mid-30s, ranging from 18 to 65.

Before roughnecks ever get to the rig, they are already fighting a perception problem, Angel said.

"A study conducted in the boomtown of Delta, Utah, found that local residents' negative perception of incoming workers led to "anticipatory shifts" in residents' attitudes and behaviors (e.g. increased fear, decreased trust) even before the workers actually arrived in the community. This finding indicates that it is not necessarily the real physical presence of workers that creates stress, but the negative thoughts and feelings toward this incoming population."

The attitudes of the general population, as well as the environment in the field, encourage stoicism. The research work on workers in the Alberta Oil Sands reveals that many of the men "internalized feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, stress and anxiety, or they put their physical and mental health on 'hold' until they eventually reach the breaking point," Angel said.

That kind of added stress is layered on to a working environment that is almost always challenging. Roughnecks live and work away from home, Angel noted, and they do it for long hours in inclement conditions.

Perhaps the worst thing about the stereotype of a roughneck is that it overlooks or is dismissive of the fact that they are playing a critical role in oilfield operations in order to provide "energy that is used to power the societies we live in," Angel said.

So, what is the incentive for doing this necessary but difficult work, and what can be done to solve some of the issues facing these workers? The answer to the first part of the question comes down to one word – money. Roughnecks command high salaries; few people would work the long, hard hours away from home and family for months at a time without being handsomely compensated, Angel's research concluded.

As for solutions, research work by Target Logistics and others shows that there are several steps that can be taken to help alleviate many of the challenges facing roughnecks. Work camp dwellings and accommodations can be made more inviting and comfortable, which is conducive to workers getting a sufficient amount of good-quality sleep. Proper nutrition can be provided to enable workers to more easily endure long hours in a physically strenuous environment. And providing certain general amenities, such as fitness centers and entertainment systems in each of the dwellings, can also add to the quality of life of roughnecks and other oilfield workers. Additionally, research in Australia has revealed that counseling services be located at work camps to help workers alleviate stress.

These steps can help increase worker health, wellbeing and retention, and they can help roughnecks to deal with the challenges that come with the job, while performing to a higher level. However, breaking down the old stereotypes that are merely a caricature of who roughnecks really are will go a long way toward raising public awareness of just how invaluable these workers are to the country's economy and energy security.

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