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It's shockingly easy to exploit legal immigrant workers

Updated by [Dara Lind](#) on August 2, 2015, 5:50 p.m. ET [@DLind](#) dara@vox.com



In the eyes of the US government, most of the people who come from other countries to work in the United States aren't actually immigrants at all. "Immigrant" refers to someone who's intending to settle in the United States permanently, and is free to work wherever he or she wants. Most people who come to the US through their employers, on the other hand, are on "nonimmigrant visas" — they're tied to a single employer for a certain amount of time. If that employer refuses to renew the visa, or sponsor them for permanent residency, they're gone.

That's a tremendous amount of power. It's not surprising, then, that it often leads to abuse — especially for low-skilled workers.

[BuzzFeed](#) recently published an investigative feature about abuses of workers on the H-2 visa (for "low-skilled" workers). It is jaw-dropping, and you should [read the whole thing](#).

The authors write about women at a Louisiana crawfish processor whose employer wouldn't let them leave the property, took their legal papers, and paid them less than \$4 an hour. If you've read articles about labor trafficking (like [the one I wrote last year](#) based on an Urban Institute report), this should sound sickeningly familiar.

And in fact, most victims of labor trafficking *are* people who immigrated to the US legally. That's because, if you think about it, employers have more power over people with work visas than over unauthorized immigrants. An unauthorized immigrant is in danger of getting deported no matter what she's doing — which doesn't give her much of an incentive to do what her employer says. Furthermore, if a workplace gets busted for immigration violations, the employer could get in legal trouble, too.

With work visas, the employee is a "legal immigrant" only as long as she's working for that employer. That's her only chance to continue to stay in the country and earn whatever money she's making. And it's her only alternative to being arrested.

Many abusive employers understand this dynamic all too well, and they use the police as enforcers. The [BuzzFeed article](#) alleges that the owner of the Louisiana crawfish farm, David West, recruited the police to help him chase down a pair of his workers who were on a double date with two men from the area:

As Sgt. Robert McGee later wrote [in a police report](#), West said that Valdez and Gonzalez were "two of his girls," and he asked the cops to haul the women in and "[scare the girls](#)."

The police brought the women, who were both in their twenties, to the station house. McGee told them they couldn't leave West's farm [without permission](#), warning that they could [wind up dead](#). To drive home the point, an officer later testified, McGee stood over Valdez and Gonzalez and [pantomimed](#) cutting his throat. He also [brandished a Taser at them](#) and said they [could be deported](#) if they ever left West's property without his permission.[...]

Two [police officers] testified that when West arrived at the station that night, he was in a state of fury. In a sworn deposition in 2012, Mamou Police Sgt. Lucas Lavergne [described West's behavior](#) this way: "He said — like looking toward the girls, he said, 'Mucho fuck you. Mucho kill you.'"

What happened that night, Travis [one of the men on the date with West's workers] said, was "nuts" and "wrong." Reflecting on West's and the police's attitude toward the women, he said, "It seemed like we had messed with his property, like we had stolen a horse or did damage to his property."

You should read the [BuzzFeed investigation](#) in full. For more on how the US immigration system fails victims of labor trafficking, read [my piece](#) from last year.