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NEWS

Safeway Warehouse Serving Bay Area Is Among Riskiest for Workers



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By [Farida Jhabvala Romero](#) [X](#) Jan 27 [Save Article](#)

Cesar Padilla, 39, a warehouse worker at the Safeway Northern California Distribution Center in Tracy on Friday, Jan. 17, 2025. Padilla says he was injured on the job in March 2021. (David M. Barreda/KQED)

Cesar Padilla was operating a clamp forklift, moving merchandise pallets at a Safeway warehouse dock, when he collided with another forklift. The collision flung Padilla into the air, and he fell hard on the ground, injuring his back.

He was out of work for a month, he said.

In the three years since Padilla's accident, which resulted in a pinched nerve in his lower back, he said he still suffers from leg numbness and throbbing pain in his neck and shoulders.

"The pain is every day. It's hard," said Padilla, who has worked for 19 years at Safeway's distribution center in Tracy, about an hour's drive from San Francisco. "Emotionally, physically, it has taken a burden on my life and my family's life."

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Padilla's injury is one of hundreds employees sustained in recent years at the warehouse complex, the supermarket chain's largest. The distribution center, which employs about 1,700 people, reported to federal regulators that most incidents were serious enough to require days away from work.

In fact, workers at Safeway's facility faced the nation's top injury rate in 2022 and the third highest in 2023 when compared to other large general warehousing and storage establishments with more than 1,000 employees, a KQED analysis of the most recently available **federal data** found.



Cesar Padilla, left, 39, of Tracy, a Safeway warehouse worker, and Philip Creamer, with Teamsters Local 439, at the Safeway distribution center in Tracy on Friday, Jan. 17, 2025. (David M. Barreda/KQED)

Occupational safety regulators consider warehousing a **high-hazard industry** due to its risks of repetitive motion and musculoskeletal disorders, falls, heat illness and other injuries. Forklifts and other equipment often move near workers doing strenuous labor.

However, Safeway's facility, which supplies dozens of stores in the Bay Area, stood out with an injury rate that was five times the nationwide **industry's average** of 5.7 injuries per 100 workers in 2022. The following year, it was three times higher.

Earlier this month, California workplace safety regulators fined Safeway nearly \$200,000 for violations at the distribution center.

Overall, 92% of roughly 650 injuries recorded in 2022 and 2023 required days away from work, according to the data. Many employers must report work-related injuries and illnesses to the Occupational and Health Safety Administration, though experts say some businesses under-report these incidents.

The City of Tracy, with just under 100,000 inhabitants, became a distribution hub for millions of customers in the Bay Area, Sacramento and

Monterey Bay over the last decade, coinciding with the rise of e-commerce. Between 2014-2022, San Joaquin County, which includes Stockton, Lodi and Tracy, saw transportation and warehousing jobs triple to about 64,000, according to data compiled by the Center for Business and Policy Research at the University of the Pacific.



A tractor-trailer exits Safeway's distribution center in Tracy on Friday, Jan. 17, 2025. (David M. Barreda/KQED)

Amazon is the county's largest employer. Walmart, Target, Costco and other companies have built sprawling warehouse operations in Tracy due its proximity to larger markets and relatively more affordable land prices and workforce costs, according to Thomas Pogue, who directs the center.

"That locational advantage has been key," Pogue said. "With any sector growing, you need to make sure that there are good jobs being created and not increasing hazardous employment."

On a recent afternoon, semi-trailer trucks drove in and out of the fenced Safeway facility, which has several buildings. The property's largest warehouse is the size of about 18 football fields, more than 1 million square feet, according to San Joaquin County Assessor's Office records.

Safeway workers have suffered debilitating strains and sprains from manually lifting and throwing loads of up to 80 pounds or pulling hundreds of cases an hour, according to one current and one former employee interviewed by KQED. They recalled seeing men breaking bones, cutting their hands and forearms on equipment, and hitting their heads on sharp metal rack edges in the aisles.



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Many employees are injured while rushing to meet Safeway's increasingly demanding production standards, but the company has refused to prevent serious injuries, said Phil Creamer, who worked nearly 30 years at the Tracy facility until 2021.

"They have to go as fast as they can just to try to keep from getting fired, and

that's when they get injured," said Creamer, now a Teamsters Local 439 business agent representing most drivers, selectors, loaders and other warehouse workers at the Safeway distribution center. "The shocking thing is, how do you own a facility like this and just ignore it?"

"Every time we try to talk to [Safeway] about safety, they just brush us off. We keep telling them that we got massive injuries here at the facility," he added. "It's like they don't care."



Philip Creamer, with Teamsters Local 439, at the Safeway distribution center in Tracy, on Friday, Jan. 17, 2025. (David M. Barreda/KQED)

Safeway declined an interview with KQED. In a statement, a spokesperson said the company is committed to ensuring safety across all its operations.

"We are taking this matter very seriously," the spokesperson said. "While we disagree with the investigation's outcome, we are collaborating with OSHA to address their concerns, including conducting a comprehensive review at our Tracy Distribution Center."

The spokesperson declined to comment on the facility's injury rate.

California workplace regulators, Cal/OSHA, recently determined that Safeway's work pace poses a danger, **issuing \$182,000 in proposed penalties** for dozens of safety violations at the complex.

A months-long Cal/OSHA inspection found Safeway failed to correct hazards for warehouse workers and truck drivers and did not effectively train managers, supervisors and other employees on prevention.



The sign in front of the Safeway distribution center in Tracy, on Friday, Jan. 17, 2025. (David M. Barreda/KQED)

“It is critical that employers recognize the physical demands and potential dangers faced by warehouse workers and take measures to protect their safety,” Cal/OSHA Chief Debra Lee said in a Jan. 7 press release.

Serious hazards outlined in the citation included workers manually throwing cases above pallet heights of nearly 6 feet high, handling excessively heavy loads, lacking adequate access to eye wash stations when handling toxic materials and being without sufficient cool-down areas during scorching summer days.

Ellen Widess, who served as Cal/OSHA chief from 2011–13, said the high injury rate at Safeway’s Tracy distribution center was unacceptable and questioned whether the agency’s fines would compel the company to address unsafe practices.

“I worry that those proposed penalties, even if they stand, are not enough of an incentive. There has to be a very serious change of corporate culture,” Widess told KQED. “It just looks like there is not adequate attention to safety.”

Safeway, a division of Albertsons Companies, operates 290 stores across Northern California, Nevada and Hawaii under banners including Andronico’s, Safeway, Pak N’ Save and Vons. Albertsons reported a **net income** of \$1.3 billion in 2023, according to the most recent full-year financial results.

Under California law, businesses with 100 or more warehouse employees are prohibited from enforcing production quotas so intense they lead to unsafe working conditions or prevent workers from taking meal or bathroom breaks.

The agency enforcing that state law, the Labor Commissioner’s Office, could not confirm whether it is currently investigating Safeway’s facility due to



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confidentiality reasons, according to a spokesperson.

Cal/OSHA gave Safeway until Jan. 3 to fix eight serious violations and until Jan. 27 to correct all others cited at the Tracy facility. Safeway filed an intent to appeal the citation on Jan. 17, which would delay the deadlines until the case is resolved.

Creamer and Padilla said they have not seen any recent changes to improve safety for the facility's mostly Latino workforce.

"Safeway just don't care about you," said Padilla, who takes pain medicine almost daily to manage his workday. "Safeway, all they care about is their money and their numbers."

The father of two children, ages 9 and 4, said he struggles to push a lawnmower at home or help his wife lift grocery bags. He wishes to be more active in his kids' basketball and softball teams.

"I'm limited as far as what I can actually do," Padilla said. "It's really sad that this company knows what they've done and what they're doing and treats their employees the way they do."

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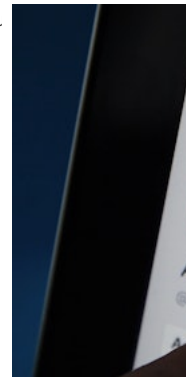


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