

US Nuclear Weapons Complex Leaves ‘Legacy of Death on American Soil’

More than 100,000 Americans have been diagnosed with cancers and other diseases after building the nation's atomic stockpile over last 70 years

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New [investigative reporting from McClatchy](#) has exposed the hidden legacy—and “enormous human cost”—of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, providing “an unprecedented glimpse of the costs of war.”

The reporting, which comes as the nation [prepares to upgrade](#) its aging nuclear arsenal [to the tune of \\$1 trillion](#) over the next 30 years, reveals the abundant health and safety risks from radiation exposure at atomic weapons facilities. It’s based on more than 100 interviews at current and former weapons plants and in the towns that surround them, as well as analysis of more than 70 million records in a federal database obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

According to *McClatchy*, 107,394 Americans have been diagnosed with cancers and other diseases after building the nation’s nuclear stockpile over the last seven decades. And at least 33,480 former nuclear workers who received compensation from a special fund—created in 2001 for those sickened in the construction of America’s nuclear bombs—are dead.

Declaring that “the great push to win the Cold War has left a legacy of death on American soil,” *McClatchy* notes that the death toll “is more than four times the number of American casualties in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

“Now with the country embarking on an ambitious \$1 trillion plan to modernize its nuclear weapons,” the investigation reads, “current workers fear that the government and its contractors have not learned the lessons of the past.”

Among the investigation’s other findings, as per journalists Rob Hotakainen, Lindsay Wise, Frank Matt, and Samantha Ehlinger:

- Federal officials greatly underestimated how sick the U.S. nuclear workforce would become. At first, the government predicted the program would serve only 3,000 people at an annual cost of \$120 million. Fourteen years later, taxpayers have spent sevenfold that estimate, \$12 billion, on payouts and medical expenses for more than 53,000 workers.
- Even with the ballooning costs, fewer than half of those who’ve applied have received any money. Workers complain that they’re often left in bureaucratic limbo, flummoxed by who gets payments, frustrated by long wait times and

overwhelmed by paperwork.

- Despite the cancers and other illnesses among nuclear workers, the government wants to save money by slashing current employees' health plans, retirement benefits and sick leave.
- Stronger safety standards have not stopped accidents or day-to-day radiation exposure. More than 186,000 workers have been exposed since 2001, all but ensuring a new generation of claimants. And to date, the government has paid \$11 million to 118 workers who began working at nuclear weapons facilities after 2001.

McClatchy produced this short video to accompany its piece:

The new reporting adds fuel to the call for global nuclear disarmament, which [reverberated](#) across the world on the 70th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki earlier this year.

"This 70th anniversary should be a time to reflect on the absolute horror of a nuclear detonation," Ann Suellentrop of Physicians for Social Responsibility-Kansas City [said at the time](#), "yet the new Kansas City Plant is churning out components to extend U.S. nuclear weapons 70 years into the future."

And along with those components, *McClatchy's* exposé suggests, "more unwanted fallout."

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