

From Brick and Mortar to Beyond: Protecting Workers in the Wholesale and Retail Trade Industries

October 19, 2021 by LCDR Adrienne Eastlake and Debbie Hornback



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This year marks the 50th Anniversary of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the 15th year of the Wholesale and Retail Trade (WRT) Sector Program. The WRT sector is one of the largest employers in today's workforce employing nearly 19 million people in 2020. [1] Historically, the businesses within this sector have traditionally functioned as brick-and-mortar workplaces. Customers come to these facilities to view, purchase items, and interact with employees. WRT workers are potentially exposed to an assortment of occupational hazards including psychosocial factors (such as stress from lack of job security and frequent interaction with the public), long workdays, shift work, violence, materials handling, static posture, prolonged standing, repetitive motion, new and emerging technologies, and heavy lifting. In addition, the ages for workers within this sector range from young to

an aging workforce.

Although the potential hazards are varied and the incidence rates are high, the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that many injuries and fatalities within the WRT sector may be attributed to a specific subset of high-risk workplaces such as mail order, stores selling items for the home (home stores), and gas stations. [2]

A Changing Industry Sector

Over the past decade, there have been notable changes within this sector that have introduced additional concerns for workplace safety. A key change is the shift from brick-and-mortar businesses to online purchasing and home delivery. Although this shift was already occurring, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process. Retail employees are not only working in stores but are providing curbside pickup and delivery services. Approximately 85% of consumers have increased curbside pick-up compared to pre-COVID-19. [3] Online purchasing decreases the potential for customer and worker interaction but changes the potential hazards for the worker. Curbside service exposes workers to weather conditions (such as heat/cold exposure, ice/wet pavement, or poor air quality from wildfire smoke) and puts them in parking lots with moving vehicles. With home delivery, workers may have additional stress from the expectation to meet specific delivery windows. Delivery workers have an increased risk of injury due to motor vehicle crashes, animal attacks, customer violence, or robbery. [4] This shift in consumer purchasing will change the future of retail as it is anticipated that 86% of consumers will continue to make purchases online in the future. [5]

Something to Celebrate

Over the past 15 years, the NIOSH WRT program has forged partnerships with other government agencies, industry, labor trade associations, professional organizations, and academia to focus on workplace safety priorities. The WRT program sets priorities based on current workplace concerns and to address research gaps. These priorities are reducing injuries and illnesses from overexertion and adverse bodily reactions; injuries from slips, trips, and falls; and motor vehicle-related injuries. To address these priorities, national data sources are used to identify risk factors, conduct research to make recommendations on the best ways to manage work to prevent injury and illness, and evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of engineering controls to reduce injuries. Based on surveillance and research data, we create evidence-based recommendations to decrease the potential for WRT workplace injuries. This information is distributed to external stakeholders, trade associations, and the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA) WRT Sector Council. Examples of guidance documents include the following:

- [Ergonomic Solutions for Retailers](#)
- [A Primer Based on Workplace Evaluations of Musculoskeletal Disorders](#)
- [Preventing Slips, Trips, and Falls in Wholesale and Retail Trade Establishments](#)

- [Older Drivers in the Workplace: How Employers and Workers Can Prevent Crashes](#)
- [Preventing work-related motor vehicle crashes](#)
- [Violence on the Job](#)
- [Use of Workers' Compensation Data for Occupational Safety and Health: Proceedings from June 2012 Workshop](#)

Key Accomplishments and Areas of Interest

The WRT sector program has achieved many successes over its 15 year. A few examples follow:

In 2011, the NIOSH WRT program published [Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities in Wholesale and Retail Trade in 2005: A Chartbook](#). This document is an informational resource to assist the public in understanding the occupational safety and health characteristics of the WRT sector, assist researchers in identifying workplace injury, illness, and fatality risks in the WRT sector, and assist employers, workers, and safety and health practitioners in identifying areas where preventive efforts might be needed.

In 2019 NIOSH researchers published [Wholesale and Retail Trade Sector Occupational Fatal and Nonfatal Injuries and Illnesses from 2006 to 2016: Implications for Intervention](#) in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine. A blog has also been published summarizing this research, [Wholesale and Retail Trade Fatal and Nonfatal Injuries and Illnesses: 2006 – 2016](#). This study analyzed the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) fatal and nonfatal injuries and illness data on U.S. workers in the WRT sector from 2006 to 2016 to identify elevated fatal and nonfatal injury and illness rates in WRT subsectors. The leading cause of death within each sector was identified including transportation-related incidents within wholesale and assaults and violence within retail. In addition, the fatality rate for the wholesale subsector 'recyclable materials' was nearly seven times higher than the overall private industry rate.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, retail employees were thrust onto the frontline. They had to learn new procedures to keep themselves, coworkers, and customers safe. While some workplaces allowed for flexibility and teleworking, retail employees risked their health and the health of their families to ensure that key services continued to be available (such as grocery stores). Retail workers had to quickly adapt to the new normal of work. Not only was COVID-19 a workplace concern, but worker stress, violence, health and safety, and communication were key concerns. Due to feedback from the NORA WRT Sector Council and other partners, the NIOSH WRT program provided several webinars to address key workplace concerns, such as de-escalation training, [work and fatigue](#), [COVID-19 information for the workplace](#), and [COVID-19 vaccines](#).

In addition to the NIOSH WRT Sector Program, the hazards in this sector are also addressed by the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA). The [NORA WRT Council](#) brings together individuals and organizations to share information, form partnerships, and promote adoption and dissemination of solutions that work. The Council seeks to facilitate the most important research, understand the most effective intervention strategies, and learn how to implement those strategies to achieve sustained improvements in workplace practice.

As we celebrate 15 years of protecting workers in WRT, the NIOSH WRT Sector Program and the NORA WRT Council look forward to continuing to protect workers as the world of work continues to evolve.

This blog is part of a [series](#) for the NIOSH 50th Anniversary. Stay up to date on how we're celebrating NIOSH's 50th Anniversary on our [website](#).

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