

27. Occupational Injury Fatalities among Older Workers in the United States, 1980–1994

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Various studies have shown that older workers experience high fatality rates due to traumatic occupational injuries. The purpose of this analysis is to present characteristics of work-related fatalities among workers aged 65 years and older and to compare these characteristics to those for workers aged 16–64. The data for this analysis were extracted from the National Traumatic Occupational Fatalities (NTOF) surveillance system. The NTOF data are composed of information obtained from death certificates from 52 U.S. vital statistics reporting units for decedents age 16 years or older with an “external” cause of death and a positive response to the “Injury at work?” item. There were 6,471 fatalities of civilian workers aged 65 years and older from 1980 through 1994. The average annual fatality rate of 13.7 per 100,000 workers was 2.7 times the rate for workers aged 16 to 64. The four leading causes of death among workers aged 65 and older were machines, motor vehicles, homicides, and falls. The rate of machinery-related incidents among males aged 65 and older was 5.8 times the rate for males aged 16 to 64. The fatality rate for falls among females aged 65 and older was 14.0 times the rate for females aged 16 to 64. The highest industry-specific rates were in mining (including oil and gas extraction), agriculture/forestry/fishing (AFF), construction, and transportation/communications/public utilities (TCPU). The highest rates by cause of death and industry were observed for machinery-related incidents in AFF and in mining, and motor vehicle incidents in TCPU. The highest occupation-specific rates were among farmers/foresters/fishers, transportation/material movers, laborers, and precision production/craft/repairers. The highest rates by cause of death and occupation were observed for machinery-related incidents among farmers/foresters/fishers and motor vehicle incidents among transportation/material movers.

Implementation of interventions to prevent fatal occupational injuries needs to focus on older workers who work in agricultural settings, who work around or operate machines, and who are exposed to fall hazards in the workplace. Because of the aging of the baby-boomers, the increasing retirement age, and retirees returning to the work-force, the number of older workers is expected to increase during the next decade. It will become increasingly important to identify job-related risks associated with the high work-related fatality rate among these workers, and to focus additional safety research and injury prevention programs on this group of workers.

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