



Solid Waste Industry Reduces Fatalities and Injuries

David F. Utterback

Recent health and safety statistics for the solid waste industry are consistent with industry improvements.

MORE WIDESPREAD ADOPTION OF EFFECTIVE SAFETY AND HEALTH PROGRAMS CAN DRIVE THE LOSS OF WORKERS AND WORKDAYS EVEN LOWER.

THE MOST RECENT DATA FROM 2009 FOR THE solid waste industry¹ indicate that occupational fatalities have decreased substantially and the downward trend in days-away-from-work injuries and illnesses continues.² These data, which are recorded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), are encouraging. Yet the industry remains one of the top 10 most hazardous in the U.S.

The total number of fatalities in 2009 was 43 after averaging 67 fatalities per year over the previous six years. Still, 83 percent of the 571 occupational fatalities between 2003 and 2009 occurred in the private sector.

Common Events

The most common events associated with fatalities in the solid waste industry are transportation incidents and contact with objects or equipment. The number of occupational fatalities in each category decreased in 2009. The BLS data show that the fatalities due to transportation incidents fell from an average of 48 over the past six years to 29 in 2009. Nearly all of this decrease resulted from fewer roadway vehicle collisions. However, the number of transportation fatalities due to solid waste workers being struck by vehicles or mobile equipment has remained relatively unchanged over the past seven years—averaging 13 per year.

Fatality reductions also extend across occupation classes with transportation workers experiencing the greatest number of fatalities as well as the greatest reduction in 2009. Construction and extraction occupations and installation, maintenance and repair occupations were also at or near historic lows. Yet collection worker fatalities, part of the transportation worker class, did not decline nearly as much as the rest of the workers in the class.

Days Away from Work

The total number of occupational injuries and illnesses that resulted in days-away-from-work also continued to decline in 2009, down 40 percent from its 2003 level, according to the BLS data. The injury and illness data are complex but indicate overall reductions in hazards for parts of the industry. Contact with objects and equipment, the leading event across the private sector of the industry, decreased by more than 40 percent over the past two years that data are available. The second leading event, overexertion, had decreased in the previous six years but showed a substantial increase for 2009 when compared with 2008. The risks for each event category were greater for the collection portion of the industry than for treatment and disposal.

Collection of injury and illness data for municipal workers by BLS began in 2008 so only two years of data have been published. The municipal waste collection workers experienced 3.5 times the number of days-away-from-work injuries and illnesses as their counterparts in the private sector although each group employs similar numbers of collection workers. There are differences in the age of the injured workers with municipal workers who are injured being older than the injured private sector workers. Some of this difference is due to 40 percent of the injured workers in the private sector being employed for less than 12 months.

Improvements and Safety

The 2009 data improvements are likely to have resulted from recent changes in industry practices



NIOSH and NSWMA

NIOSH has collaborated with the National Solid Waste Management Association (NSWMA) on dissemination of Slow Down to Get Around campaign materials. The program originated with Rumpke in Cincinnati following a fatality and another serious injury due to workers being struck by other vehicles. Many solid waste companies have inserted the brochure in their customer bills to help raise awareness of worker roadway hazards. For more information, visit the NSWMA Web site at www.environmentalistseveryday.org

that created safer work environments. What are the effective practices? We do not have information to answer that important question. Where do you find your return on investment for safety practices? Which of the following are you practicing?

- Comprehensive safety and health programs
- Safety culture that emanates from the top management
- Safety climate where workers know their roles
- Safety program orientation for all new employees including temporary staff
- Task specific training on injury and illness prevention that is repeated over time
- Use of equipment to limit worker overexertion exposures
- Enforced lockout tag out procedures
- Automation of collection equipment

No one can predict the future health and safety statistics for the solid waste industry. The recent data are consistent with industry improvements in safety and health practices. Continuing industry emphasis on effective safety and health programs can drive the loss of workers and workdays even lower. | WA

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Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

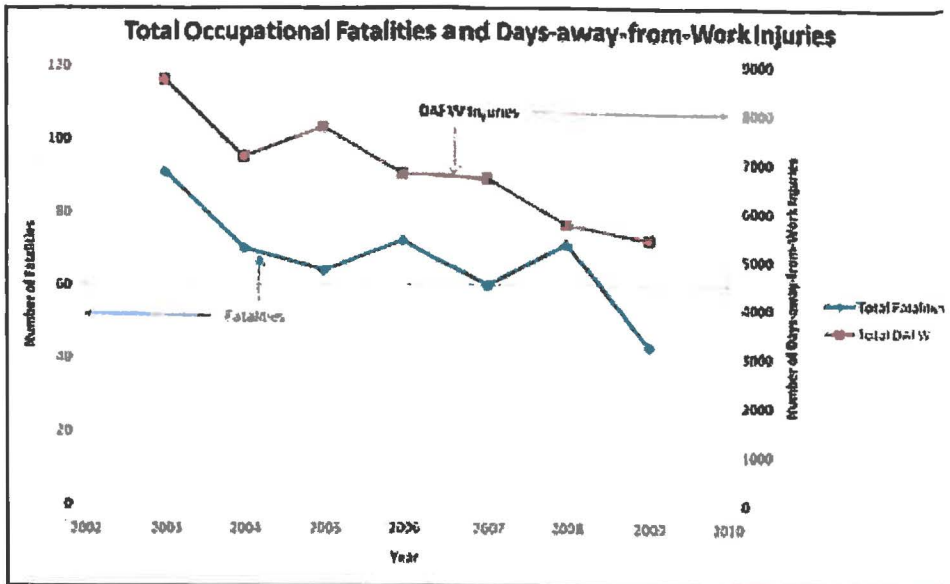


Image courtesy of David Utterback and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Notes

1. Preliminary fatality data for 2010 will be published by BLS in August 2011, 2010 final injury and illness data in November 2011, and final traumatic injury fatality data for 2010 in April 2012.

2. For the purposes of this report, we restrict the data to those for waste collection (NAICS 5621) and waste disposal and treatment (NAICS 5622). These groups both include solid waste and hazardous waste workers for a total population of 245,000 workers in the private sector plus 100,000 municipal waste workers.

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