



NIOSH Warns: Employment Can Be Dangerous & Deadly for Adolescents

NIOSH UPDATE:

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The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) warns students, parents, teachers, and employers that thousands of young people are injured or killed at work each year. In a recent study, NIOSH found an estimated 64,100 adolescents (aged 14-17) were treated in emergency departments for workplace injuries in 1992. While this figure may be shocking, it is also extremely conservative. Prior studies have shown that only 36% of work-related injuries are treated in emergency departments. Moreover, in a separate study of workplace death, NIOSH found that 670 16- and 17-year-olds died at work in the 10-year period 1980-1989.

"This nation cannot accept that in today's society children are still being robbed of their health, their youth, and their lives by workplace hazards" said NIOSH Director, Dr. Linda Rosenstock. "The fact remains that millions of children are working in this country, and we must act to ensure that they are protected from the dangers which all too often accompany work," she remarked.

NIOSH previously found that 41% of occupational injury deaths of youth investigated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) occurred while the child was engaged in work prohibited by federal child labor laws. Although it was not possible to determine how many of the deaths in the present study resulted from prohibited activities, it is clear that many resulted from violations of laws intended to protect young workers, such as the federal Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and state child labor laws. For instance, at least 53 workers under the age of 18 were driving a motor vehicle at the time of their death, an activity typically prohibited under child labor laws.

The United States has more of its children in the workforce than any other affluent country. Protecting the safety of working youth will require a collaborative effort. NIOSH urgently requests assistance in informing young people, parents, teachers, school boards, physicians, and the business community about child labor laws and the risks of injury in the workplace. Adolescents and their parents must make informed decisions about appropriate jobs for young people. Teachers, school boards, and physicians should consider these issues when dispensing work permits. The business community needs to be aware of its responsibilities under the law to protect youth in its employ and to understand the potential for tragedy related to noncompliance with existing laws.

ADOLESCENT DEATH ON THE JOB

Most Recent Statistics

Of the 670 occupational adolescent deaths, 44% occurred during the summer months (June through August). 617 of the victims were male and most of the victims (540) were White. The average annual rate of occupational injury death for 16- and 17-year olds was 5.1 per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers (the rate for adults 18 years of age and older was 6.1 per 100,000).

Cause of Death

The leading causes of occupational injury death were motor vehicle-related, machine-related, electrocution, homicide, and falls. Although the overall risk of occupational death is lower for 16- and 17-year-olds than for adults, the risk for workplace death by electrocution suffocation, drowning, poisoning, and natural and environmental causes appears to be greater for

young people.

Hazardous Industries

Information on the type of industry was only available for 53% of the fatally injured youth. Of these deaths, most occurred in the agriculture/forestry/fishing, construction, services, retail trade, and manufacturing industries.

ADOLESCENT INJURY ON THE JOB

Most Recent Statistics

An estimated 64,100 adolescent work-related injuries were treated in hospital emergency rooms in 1992. The overall injury rate was 5.8 per 100 full-time employee equivalents (7.0 for males and 4.4 for females).^{*} Males also accounted for a larger percentage of injuries (66%) than females.

Types of Injuries

Lacerations accounted for most adolescent injuries (34%). Other common injuries in order include contusions and abrasions, sprains, and strains, burns, and fractures and dislocations.

Hazardous Industries

The majority (54%) of injuries to adolescent workers occurred in the retail trade industry. Within this industry 71% of injuries occurred in eating and drinking establishments. A large portion of these injuries were lacerations and burns.

Other industries where a large number of adolescent workers were injured include service, agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and transportation/communication/public utilities.

PREVENTION

The prevention of adolescent occupational fatalities requires an evaluation of the appropriateness of certain hazardous jobs in agriculture and construction for young people. Injuries in these two industries combined claimed the lives of at least 169 16- and 17- year-olds in the 1980's. Regulation, enforcement, and education all play important roles in preventing future workplace deaths among young people.

To prevent adolescent occupational injuries, hazards must be identified and intervention strategies specific to adolescents developed and implemented. Targeted intervention efforts can significantly decrease these injuries. For example, implementing methods to prevent burns in eating and drinking establishments could prevent about 5,650 adolescent occupational burns each year. Further research in other industries will help to identify additional prevention methods.

For copies of Adolescent Occupational Injuries Requiring Hospital Emergency department Treatment: A Nationally Representative Sample, Occupational Injury Deaths of 16- and 17-Year-Olds in the United States, or for information on other occupational safety and health concerns call toll free: 1-800-35-NIOSH.

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