



NIOSH Study Finds Work Injuries, Illnesses Among Young Employees Pervasive, Preventable

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- Employers, educators, parents, and others can take simple, practical steps to protect working adolescents and children from job-related injuries and illnesses.

Occupational injuries and illnesses among working adolescents and children under 18 years of age are pervasive but preventable, according to a new study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). The study examined data from 1993 and estimated that, as a conservative figure, working youths sustained 21,620 injuries and illnesses serious enough to result in one or more lost work days.

NIOSH found that work-related disorders occurred more frequently among 16 and 17 year olds than any other child age group, most often by job category among young workers in food preparation and service occupations, and most often by workplace category in eating and drinking establishments. Sprains and strains, cuts and lacerations, contusions and abrasions, heat burns, and fractures and dislocations were the most common types of injuries and illness.

“Especially at this time of year, as the school season ends and summer employment begins, it is important to recognize that young people can be hurt on the job, often seriously,” said NIOSH Director Linda Rosenstock, M.D., M.P.H. “But with the right precautions, we all can help ensure that work is productive and rewarding — not risky — for youthful employees.”

The study, based on NIOSH analysis of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses, found that work-related injuries most commonly resulted from falls on the same level (such as falls to floors and falls onto and against objects), followed by overexertion, striking against objects, contact with hot objects or substances, being struck by falling objects, and being struck by a slipping hand-held object.

NIOSH noted that the data undercount injuries and illnesses in working youths and children because the BLS survey does not include self-employed workers, farmers with fewer than 11 employees, private households, and government employees. Also, the data do not include work-related deaths, or injuries and illnesses that do not result in lost work time.

The study noted NIOSH findings that an estimated 64,000 youths and children were treated in emergency departments for work-related injuries in 1992, and that 67 youths and children died from work injuries in 1994, according to BLS Data. A 1982 study using emergency department data found that workers under 18 years of age had higher injury rates than adult workers.

The study, published in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Morbidity and Mortality weekly Report, said that employers, parents, educators, and others should be aware of some simple precautions to protect young workers. For example:

Employers should know and comply with child labor laws, and those laws also should be familiar to school guidance counselors and physicians who sign work permits for children. Although federal child labor laws prohibit employment of 14 and 15 year olds in cooking and baking, one-third of the injured and ill 14 and 15 year olds in the study were identified as cooks.

Employers should observe routine precautions that are applicable to all workers (such as providing appropriate shoes for preventing slips and falls, a frequent cause of injury) as well as taking additional precautions specific to young workers (such as limiting weights they may be required to lift).

Employers should provide training that recognizes the relative inexperience of young workers, and accounts for differences in maturity and developmental level that affect young people's learning styles, judgment, and behavior.

NIOSH Activities Impacting Young Workers

NIOSH has conducted some of the first national studies of fatal and nonfatal injuries among adolescent workers and has distributed these findings to young workers, educators, parents and employers. Earlier this month, a document containing practical recommendations for preventing work-related injuries among adolescents was sent to every high school principal in the U.S. In turn, several of these school administrators have disseminated the summary to students and their families in innovative ways in time for the busy summer employment season.

Through the NIOSH Child Labor Working Team, the agency has taken a leadership role in bringing together experts from the Department of Labor, Department of Education, State Labor and Health Departments, and private organizations to address the critical issues of workplace safety and health among our nation's working youth.

NIOSH is supporting community-based demonstration projects in Massachusetts and California to develop and test innovative, effective materials and methods that can be used by community members to inform young people and adults about workplace hazards, and promote safe and healthful working experiences for adolescents. A how-to guide for communities will be developed through these projects.

NIOSH is updating a resource guide for vocational teachers and administrators on workplace safety and health, taking into account changes that have occurred in the workplace since the last edition and adding new information on effective strategies to prevent injuries and illnesses. The ultimate goal is to provide vocational students with knowledge about recognizing and correcting hazards and working safely.

For more information on workplace safety and health issues or to request copies of "Work Injuries and Illnesses Associated With Child Labor-United States, 1993," or the NIOSH Alert, "Preventing Deaths and Injuries of Adolescent Workers" (Publication No. 95-125) call: 1-800-35-NIOSH

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