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Occupational Health and Safety Surveillance of Temporary Help Supply Workers in Washington State

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BACKGROUND: Previous research on the rise of temporary or contingent work increases the risk of worker injury has been focused largely on discrepancies in health outcomes rather than on the underlying mechanisms which lead to the differential. We use the State Fund workers' compensation claims database in Washington State and injured-worker surveys to conduct occupational health and safety surveillance of the temporary help supply (THS) industry.

METHODS: Workers' compensation claims rates, time-loss days, claim costs per 100 FTE and insurance premium levels are compared to those of permanent employees working in comparable industries and occupations, as represented by their risk class. To explore the role played by differences between temporary and permanent workers in specific tasks performed, safety training, or differences in age or tenure, we also conducted telephone interviews with recently injured temporary and permanent workers, matched by workplace and demographic characteristics. These interviews focus on: the worker's job history; the kinds of tasks they performed; the hazards they faced; how they handle situations they deem to be unsafe; the extent and quality of safety training and equipment provided; suggestions for how to reduce injuries to workers; and suggestions for how best to deliver educational materials.

RESULTS: Workers who are employed by temporary agencies have a higher claims rate and more lost workdays per 100 FTEs than do their permanently employed counterparts, controlling for industry. The preliminary results from the injured-worker surveys show that temporary workers were less likely than permanent workers to report having been asked by their agency or the client about their experience or expertise in the work to be done prior to being assigned. They also rated the quality of safety training received by the client employer to be less adequate than that reported by their permanent counterparts. Discrepancies suggestive of higher risk for temporary workers were found as well for frequency of training, adequacy of supervision and whether they felt they could refuse tasks they deemed to be unsafe. We found mixed evidence of discrepancy in level of hazard exposure.

CONCLUSIONS: Substantial disparities in claims rates between temporary and permanent workers persist even after controlling for occupation and industry. Survey results also show significant differences between these populations on risk factors related to experience, safety training, and supervision. Prevention efforts need to take into account the non-standard nature of employment arrangements in this sector.

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