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Work-Related Injuries Underreported

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

Employers and workers routinely underreport work-related injuries and illnesses, calling into question the accuracy of nationwide data that the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) compiles each year, the [Government Accountability Office](#) said Monday.

The report, by the G.A.O., the auditing arm of Congress, said many employers did not report workplace injuries and illnesses for fear of increasing their workers' compensation costs or hurting their chances of winning contracts.

The report also said workers did not report job-related injuries because they feared being fired or disciplined and worried that their co-workers might lose rewards, like bonuses or steak dinners, as part of safety-based incentive programs.

"The widespread underreporting so clearly documented in this report is undermining the health and safety of American workers," said Senator [Tom Harkin](#), Democrat of Iowa and chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. "If we don't know the full extent of the workplace hazards workers face, we cannot fully address these risks."

Mr. Harkin was one of the Congressional leaders who requested the report.

In response to the report, which examined OSHA's audits from 2005 to 2007, the safety administration said it would adopt the accountability office's recommendations, which include requiring inspectors to interview employees during all audits to check the accuracy of employer-provided injury data.

The accountability office noted that the rate of workplace injuries — there were 4 million in 2007, including 5,600 fatalities — has declined fairly steadily since 1992, which OSHA attributed to improvements in workplace safety and the decline in the number of manufacturing jobs.

But the G.A.O. report cited several academic studies that found that OSHA data failed to include up to two-thirds of all workplace injuries and illnesses.

The report noted that because of OSHA's "sole reliance on employer-reported injury and illness data" in one of its major surveys, "some academic studies have reported that the survey may undercount the total number of workplace injuries and illnesses."

The accountability office also found that more than a third of the occupational health practitioners it surveyed said that employers or workers had pressured them to provide insufficient medical treatment to hide or play down work-related injuries or illnesses.

The safety and health administration requires employers with more than 10 workers to record every work-related injury or illness that results in lost work time or medical treatment other than first aid. Some occupational health practitioners say that to avoid recording an injury, some employers will try to limit treatment for a serious injury to just first aid.

In other cases, the practitioners said, employers might seek alternative diagnoses if the initial diagnosis would result in a recordable injury or illness.

One manager took an injured worker to several medical providers until the manager found one who would certify that treatment required only first aid, thus making it an injury that did not have to be recorded, one practitioner told researchers, according to the report. Many employers fear that reporting numerous injuries will prompt a full-scale OSHA inspection.

The accountability office said that 53 percent of health practitioners had reported experiencing pressure from company officials to play down injuries or illnesses, and that 47 percent had reported experiencing this pressure from workers.

“This report confirms that when it comes to the documenting of workplace injuries, we can’t just take employers at their word,” said Senator [Patty Murray](#), Democrat of Washington and chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety. “The system, to this point, has been all too easy to game.”

According to the G.A.O. report, 67 percent of the 1,187 occupational health practitioners surveyed had reported observing worker fear of disciplinary action for reporting an injury or illness, and 46 percent said this fear had some impact on the accuracy of employers’ injury and illness records.

One reason workers fail to report injuries, the report said, was that their employers required drug testing after incidents resulting in reported injuries or illnesses, regardless of any evidence of drug use.

The report also questioned employers’ safety incentive programs, which reward workers when their worksites have few recordable injuries or illnesses.

While these programs can promote safe behavior, the report said three-quarters of health practitioners said they believed that workers sometimes avoided reporting work-related injuries and illnesses as a result of these programs because they feared that doing so would cause them or their co-workers to miss the chance of winning prizes.

Correction: November 16, 2009

A previous version of this article gave an incorrect name for the Government Accountability Office.

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