



**WORK
SHOULDN'T
HURT**

**A survey on the state of
work health and safety
in Australia**



Foreword

Unfortunately we have seen a series of serious workplace injuries and fatalities which have received significant public attention in the last several years. When reported in this way these incidents can appear to be outliers, the tragic consequence of managerial mistakes or negligence. What this survey shows is that for more than 25,000 respondents – a representative sample of the Australian workforce – a career without workplace injuries is the exception not the norm.

This survey shows that in most workplaces workers are aware of serious threats to their physical and mental health which are being tolerated or ignored by their employers. A majority of workers have witnessed a near miss – an incident where a coworker was nearly seriously injured or killed. A majority have experienced poor mental health as a result of hazards in their workplace which their employer failed to manage.

Overall this survey shows a workforce which is being failed by a system which does not levy significant penalties against employers who allow hazards to persist or engage in other behavior which results in injury or death. It shows that Australian workers are dealing with systemic physical and mental health issues as a result of the conditions of their work.

This survey shows that you are almost twice as likely in Australia to have suffered an injury at work than to have a secure job.

The data collected in this survey shows the desperate need for action to ensure that employers uphold their responsibility to their employees to provide a safe workplace free from physical and psychological harm, and that when workers are concerned about safety they have immediate support in the resolution of that problem.

The survey again confirms that union workplaces are safer workplaces. From greater consultation through to on the job advocacy, being a union member means having the support to make work safe.

The evidence collected through this survey reinforces the need to endorse all 34 recommendations of the Boland Review into model WHS laws.

We call on all state and territory governments as well as the Federal Government to take action now to address the findings of this survey and to prevent further injuries and deaths in our workplaces.

Liam O'Brien
Assistant Secretary, ACTU

Key findings

78%

of people have suffered a mental or physical injury at work

54%

are aware of existing hazards in their workplace which could cause serious injury or illness

79%

do not believe penalties are sufficient to force employers to take safety seriously

61%

have experienced poor mental health because their employer did not manage hazards in their workplace

“

They filled in the trench four hours after they had retrieved my son from it. He was in hospital fighting for his life and they buried the evidence. The investigation was poorly handled, they didn't ask all witnesses on the day what they had seen. They say they needed more evidence, but they never properly investigated.

- Mother of construction worker, VIC

Intro

This major survey of Australian workers and their experience of safety and injury at work shows a system which is failing to keep workers safe. While only one in every hundred workers is compensated for a workplace injury every year, our survey shows that over their lifetimes almost 80 per cent of respondents have suffered physical or mental injuries as a result of their work. Sixteen per cent know someone who has died at work or from an illness caused by their work.

The survey shows that psychological workplace hazards are under-regulated and consequently under-recognised but just as dangerous as physical ones. In too many workplaces hazards of all kinds are ignored or tolerated.

Workers' responses demonstrate a widespread belief that employers will politely listen to complaints about unsafe work conditions. However workers do not believe that employers either know what to do or are willing to take action on serious threats to their safety.

This is reinforced by the knowledge that penalties which companies might face for wrongdoing can often be claimed against insurance, a practice that almost all workers believe should be stopped.



Section 1: Exposure to workplace hazards

Employer inaction in the face of threats to workers' health can be seen in the amount of exposure respondents in our survey reported to hazards in the workplace. Beyond the 54 per cent who said they were aware of a hazard in the workplace which could cause themselves or a coworker a serious injury or illness, 62 per cent said they had witnessed a 'near miss' at work where either they or a coworker had narrowly avoided being injured by that hazard.

We often think of hazards in the workplace in terms of physical threats to safety – unsafe machinery, slippery floors or sharp objects. But the results of the survey show that how work is structured and organised present persistent psychological and physical hazards which are just as dangerous to the physical and mental health of working people.

Occupational violence, workplace stress, hostile work environments, exposure to trauma and other ongoing issues in many workplaces can – and in the experience of the workers who responded to our survey, do – lead to physical injuries and mental health issues.

Being in a workplace where you or your coworkers risk being threatened with violence or attacked by clients or patients, or being in a workplace which demands persistently long hours of high-stress work with little or no support, or requires you to work unsociable hours, or where you are subjected to bullying or abuse or harassment by colleagues, is just as dangerous as a faulty machine or a wet floor.

Sixty-one per cent of workers who responded to our survey said that they had experienced mental illness because of ongoing issues in the workplace which were not addressed by their employer.

“

A worker was assaulted by a client, there were a number of witnesses to the occurrence. The incident involved a client picking up a table and throwing at the worker and hitting them in the pelvic region, fracturing bone. The workplace OH&S admin refused to accept the injury claim. The worker was off work for 2 months recovering from the incident.

- Social Worker

62%

witnessed a near miss at work that could have injured themselves or a workmate

61%

have experienced poor mental health because their employer did not manage hazards in their workplace

Section 2: Employer attitudes to WHS

The attitude of employers towards workplace health and safety, and the extent to which workers believe that their employer cares about and is open to discussions about safety is critical to keeping working people safe at work.

Our survey found that while many workers feel confident that they could raise an issue of workplace health and safety with their employer, more than half were aware of an existing, unresolved issue in their workplace which could result in serious injury or illness to a coworker or themselves.

These findings suggest a level of box-ticking by employers. Willing to meet the most basic requirements by taking meetings with staff and appearing open to complaints, but not willing to make the changes in workplaces which will actually prevent further injuries or deaths.

“

A fellow worker had an oxygen cylinder explode next to him. Was extremely lucky to survive, was severely burnt and still suffers 10yrs on. Prior to the incident it was recognised that there was a safety issue with the valves but the company decided to do a progressive change. After the incident they failed to admit the cause and attempted to find ways they could blame the worker. The compensation he received was pathetic.

- Machine operator, VIC

54%

are aware of existing hazards in their workplace which could cause serious injury or illness

77%

know someone who has been seriously injured or ill because of their work

Section 3: Rate of workplace injuries and fatalities

Only 21 per cent of respondents to our survey said they had never experienced a physical injury or mental health problems at work.

Of the almost 80 per cent who have been injured at work, a plurality (34 per cent) reported they had experienced both issues with poor mental health and physical injuries at work. Twenty-five per cent reported mental health problems and 18 per cent reported physical injuries.

In addition, 77 per cent of respondents reported they were aware of a coworker who had been seriously injured or made seriously ill because of their work.

This horrifying finding unfortunately only confirms what anyone connected with the workforce already knows; injuries are a lived experience of a vast majority of workers. Physical hazards mean that 16 per cent of the workforce knows someone who has died at work or as the result of a workplace illness.

While this number is shocking, our data also shows that the growing rate of insecure work might cause this number to rise. Of the respondents who were in casual or labour hire contracts, 23 per cent knew of someone who had died at work or as the result of a workplace illness.

Issues like workplace abuse, overwork, threats of violence or actual violence, bullying and harassment mean that stress, depression and anxiety are rampant, causing immense harm to millions of working Australians, with little being done to address them.

“

A young friend was electrocuted and died atop a building while working alone on an airconditioning unit.

- Retail, VIC

“

3 workers were on the deck of a supply vessel, the task was to secure cargo when the vessel turned side on to the waves, causing the deck to become awash above waist deep. The water shifted a container and crushed a worker to death.

- Seafarer, NT

“

I have been physically hit by a student twice this year. I was not offered the opportunity to go home. It is very stressful to have this student return to class with no apology.

- Primary School Teacher, WA

Section 4: Mental illness at work

The most common form of injury at work is a mental health issue caused by the conditions of a person's employment. More than 60 per cent of respondents to the survey had experienced poor mental health because of unaddressed psychological hazards in their workplace. These can include debilitating issues like stress, anxiety, depression or self-harm.

Responses paint a grim picture of workplace conditions in Australia which are causing such a high rate of mental illness.

- 48 per cent of respondents work long hours.
- 66 per cent have high workloads, to the extent that they feel they cannot do everything they are asked to.
- 47 per cent have been exposed to traumatic events, distressed or aggressive clients, patients or customers.
- 38 per cent work unsociable hours.
- 46 per cent report a lack of support in their job from supervisors and insufficient training or resources.
- 49 per cent say they have experienced bullying, aggression, harassment, or other forms of conflict with coworkers.

Sixty-one per cent of respondents said that their employer failing to address these issues had caused mental health issues for them. Sixty-seven per cent said they did not believe that their employer knew how to address mental health issues in the workplace.

Of these respondents 16 per cent missed two to three days of work, 9 per cent missed between a week and a month, and a further 10 per cent missed between a month and a year. This again confirms previous research which showed that time lost due to mental health issues exceeds that lost to physical injuries.

The severity of this problem is not currently matched by regulations to address it. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents to the survey said they believe there should be specific workplace health and safety regulations to deal with hazards which are especially likely to cause mental illness.

Seventy-two per cent said that their employer either never or only sometimes took mental health issues in the workplace seriously.

“

I have seen children attempt on many occasions to end their life at a former work place. I have also seen and experienced work place bullying at it's worse. To the point of workers attempting to end their life.

Section 5: Physical injuries at work

Despite being an area of WHS which has been the focus of union, employer and government efforts for decades, prevention of physical injury at work is still failing a huge number of Australian workers.

Occupational violence is a phenomenon which working people have known about for as long as modern workplaces have existed, but which employers are still struggling to address.

The threat or reality of physical abuse from patients, clients, customers or other members of the public is a constant hazard for many healthcare workers, first responders and educators. Despite the prevalence of this issue, 67 per cent of respondents said they did not believe their employer knew how to deal with occupational violence in their workplace.

Fifty-two per cent of workers who responded to our survey had sustained a physical injury at work. Sixteen per cent of respondents know someone who has died due to workplace injury or an illness due to their work.

We know from previous research that roughly 200 people die at work every year, and it's estimated that several thousand die every year from injuries or illness sustained or contracted at work.

“

I have been physically assaulted at work seven times over my teaching career. In 2018 I developed a psychological injury after being physically assaulted three times in one year. I was diagnosed with chronic stress and became very unwell. It took Comcare and EML 5 months to pay me one months salary which put me under financial pressure causing more stress. Psychological injuries need to be assessed and paid for more expeditiously.

- Teacher, ACT

16%

know someone that has been killed at work or died from a work-related disease

68%

believe their employer or workplace does not know how to deal with occupational violence at work

52%

have experienced a physical injury at work

Section 6: Penalties and fines

Under the current system in most states, when a company or senior manager is found to be liable for a workplace injury or death they receive a small fine which they can claim against their insurance. The ACTU has been campaigning to change this to ensure that the employers who are responsible for injuries and deaths at work face the consequences of their actions.

Seventy-one per cent of respondents don't think the current regime imposes penalties that are significant enough to make employers take safety seriously. A majority don't think it should be possible for employers to claim fines against their insurance. 91 per cent think that employers who are found responsible for the death of a worker should face up to 20 years in jail, just like any other incident of manslaughter.

“

An abseiler was working on our east wall scaling small rocks off when a 200 ton rock fell from above and killed him. I don't know if it was not handled properly afterwards but I am sure it could have been prevented, as that wall has always been unstable and has had hundreds of tons of rock fall off it to the point that I refuse to work anywhere near it.

- Mine worker, TAS

“

Drug dealers with knives and screw drivers ran through the office chasing each other and I was assaulted in my room when I asked them to leave. It took over 12 months for police to lay any charges to the offenders. I lost 30 per cent of my hearing in my right ear and I have sustained an injury to the lower right side of my head. This happened in 2000. The company was not supportive and just suggested EAP. Victims of crime paid for all medical costs. I was awarded \$100.00 and no Workcover.

- Public tenant worker, VIC

79%

believe penalties faced by employers or companies who seriously injure or kill workers aren't significant enough

57%

believe employers and companies shouldn't be able to take out insurance to cover fines for breaches of work health and safety laws

97%

believe unions should be able to take employers and companies that break healths and safety laws to court

Section 7: The role of unions

Unions play a key role in ensuring working people have someone to turn to when they are concerned about safety in their workplace. Sixty per cent of respondents who were union members knew who their Health and Safety Representative (HSR) was, while only 6 per cent did not have one in their workplace. Of non-union respondents, only 46 per cent knew who their HSR was, and 16 per cent did not have one in their workplace. Our data shows that union membership also ensures that workers are consulted more often about safety. Twenty-three per cent of non-union member respondents said that they were never consulted about safety at work, while only 15 per cent of union members said the same.

Workers also want an expanded role for unions in enforcement of safety standards. Ninety-seven per cent say that unions should have a role in WHS, and should be able to take employers to court if they break health and safety laws.

Ninety-eight per cent say that unions should be able to represent workers in disputes with employers about workplace health and safety.

Attempts to restrict unions from entering workplaces to investigate safety breaches and support workers and Health and Safety Representatives has already and continues to make workplaces less safe. Ninety per cent of respondents want this to change so that unions can respond immediately if there is a breach or suspected breach of safety in a workplace.

“

Close friend, apprentice electrician, electrocuted at work and killed. Could have been prevented.

- Teacher, VIC

97%

believe unions should have a role in work health and safety

98%

believe unions should be able to represent workers in disputes with their employer or company about work health and safety issues

90%

believe unions should be able to immediately enter workplaces to investigate work health and safety breaches

address

Level 4/365 Queen Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

phone

1300 486 466

web

actu.org.au
australianunions.org.au

ACTU D No.

27 / 2019

