



NEWSLETTER

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HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR YOUNG WORKERS

In July 2001, 16-year-old Alex Webster was killed while working at a farm near St Peters in Prince Edward Island. A farm wagon rolled forward and crushed him against a tractor.

A 13-year-old Charles Picard was gravely injured in a workplace accident at a factory co-owned by his father. He died after being on life support since the July 28, 2003 accident at Usinage Beauport 2000. The forklift he was driving fell over when he attempted to drive it onto the retractable platform of a parked tow truck.

In the fall of 2005, Ottawa teenager Jennifer Teague was found murdered after she disappeared on her way home from a late night shift at a Wendy's restaurant. In January 2006, 17-year-old Brigitte Serre was found murdered in a back room of the Montreal gas station where she was working her first solo overnight shift. Following an attempted robbery in February 2006 in Winnipeg, the slaying of a 19-year-old convenience store clerk once again raised questions about the safety of employees, especially young workers, who work alone.

In July 2008, a 15-year-old boy died near the Manitoba community of Stony Mountain in a horrific construction accident when he was buried under a mountain of searing-hot asphalt. The boy, although too young to work on construction jobs under Manitoba labour laws, was part of a paving crew working on a parking lot.

While such cases are rare and extreme in nature and often involve hazardous working conditions, the fact is that every year hundreds of young workers are injured and an unfortunate number are even killed in a workplace. Organizations and young people need to consider whether or not potential jobs are sufficiently safe. Canadian studies by the [Institute for Work and Health](#) (IWH) have found that a young person's risk of a workplace injury is as much as twice that of an adult worker, particularly when one considers the fact that youth tend to work fewer hours than older workers.

What are the kinds of injuries common to young workers?

Definitions used in U.S. and other foreign studies of young workers usually range between 14 to 17 year olds or from 15 to 24 year olds. In Canada, however, employment statistics and workers compensation claims reports normally define young workers as between 15 to 24 years old. According to a 2005 report by the [Canadian Institute for Health Information](#) (CIHI), of all job-related injuries that required hospitalization in fiscal year 2002-03, 13 per cent involved workers aged 24 or younger. Unfortunately, ten per cent of these young workers died from their injuries, the majority of them caused by accidents involving machinery or electrocution. ¹ According to WorkSafeBC, the number of young workers who suffered on-the-job injuries in British Columbia had risen 30 per cent from 2001 to 2005. 9,000 young workers were injured on the job in that province in 2005. ²

¹ *1 in 10 severe injuries happen on the job, young people at high risk: study.* Sheryl Ubelacker, Canadian Press, April 28, 2005

² *We call all help keep young workers safe on the job.* Jennifer Newman and Darryl Grigg, Vancouver Sun, June 10, 2006

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”

One should note that half of young Canadians leave high school to enter directly into the work force. As a result, many encounter early exposure to dangers in the workplace to their health and safety. Research evidence has been emerging that the risk of occupational injury is elevated among workers who are new to their jobs and in firms that are newly established, especially small businesses. Recent research at the IWH reinforces concerns about the evident strong correlation of “newness” to work and workplace injury.³

Young workers have higher injury rates than older workers, even after taking into account differences in job characteristics. This may be the result of factors associated with youth, such as immaturity, or because young workers are more likely than others to be new to their jobs, unfamiliar with the hazards associated with them, and uninformed about occupational health and safety laws and practices in general.

In particular, the IWH research indicated that young male workers experienced a higher rate of injury, and that much of this elevated injury risk came from the fact that they were more likely than older men to be in high risk occupations. One important factor that may help explain the higher injury rates for young workers is their relatively high concentration in small organizations. These organizations may have more limited knowledge/resources regarding occupational health and safety than larger organizations.

The IWH also looked at how the type of work injury requiring medical attention varied by age group. For both male and female workers aged 15 to 19, 47 per cent of work injuries were in the category “cuts/punctures/scrapes/bruises/blisters,” which represented just 24 per cent of injuries for those aged 35-plus. The work injuries of older adults, both men and women, were more heavily concentrated in the category of “dislocations/sprains and strains.”

How does labour legislation determine where young workers can safely work?

To begin with, age does play a factor as to which jobs a young person can apply, especially where the work is considered hazardous. Each jurisdiction has laws governing age restrictions for young workers.

For example, in Ontario, persons must be 14 years old to work in establishments such as offices, stores, arenas, and restaurant serving areas. For construction projects, Ontario requirements often refer to specific work to be performed by a “competent worker”. This is someone who is qualified because of knowledge, training and experience to perform the work and who has knowledge of all potential or actual dangers to health or safety in the work. Other than trade apprentices, this requirement would likely exclude most youth from working in construction projects. Moreover, persons have to be at least 16 years old to work in construction, surface mine (except the working face), logging operations and mining plants. In addition, under Ontario legislation, persons must be eighteen years of age to work in window cleaning or certain types of mining.

Federal health and safety and labour standards laws govern such sectors as the federal government, telecommunications, banking and inter-provincial transportation. A general provision precludes federal employers from hiring persons under the age of 17 years if the work is “likely to be injurious to their health or to endanger their safety.” Age restrictions also exist federally for work in mines, on ships, with explosives or in the nuclear industry.

Each federal, provincial and territorial jurisdiction has a Web site devoted to their specific occupational health and safety and labour standards laws, and in turn to any age restrictions for specified types of work. [OSH Links - Canada](#), provided by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety,

³ “Newness” and the risk of occupational injury: Institute for Work and Health, Issue Briefing, May 2009
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provides direct links to various government and non-government sources dealing with occupational health and safety and labour standards in each region of the country.

What are the responsibilities of both employers and young workers?

For those types of work where the majority of youth can legally work, young workers need first to be aware of common hazards existing in the workplace. These can include everything from hazardous materials, slipping hazards, noise, heavy lifting, dangerous machinery, flying projectiles, fire, personal security, emergency measures, etc. Such hazards represent safety risks to eyes, ears, heads, hands and other bodily parts, as well as potential health and psychological concerns.

Ontario's [Young Workers Awareness Safety Program](#) provides a helpful on-line resource book outlining the seven most important things that young workers should know about workplace health and safety.

These include three basic employee legislated rights in the workplace:

- ☞ right to know about dangers,
- ☞ right to participate in dealing with health and safety matters, and
- ☞ right to refuse unsafe work without fear of employer reprisal.

Other jurisdictions and safety bodies provide similar Internet-based information to inform young workers about their rights and obligations under occupational health and safety laws.

From the outset, organizations for their part should ensure that adequate supervision, hazard information, safety training and personal protective equipment are provided to all new workers. In a recent study using data from the *Workplace and Employee Survey*, Peter Smith and Cameron Mustard of the IWH examined the prevalence of health and safety training reported by workers of all ages in their first 12 months of employment. Over 75 per cent of the employees surveyed indicated that they had not received such training. Furthermore, there was no evidence of a greater provision of health and safety training in higher risk (e.g. manual) occupations or specifically to young workers.⁴ Organizations must do a much better job at providing all new workers with adequate and appropriate health and safety training. Moreover, supervisors, co-workers, parents and young workers themselves all have an obligation to ensure that work is being performed in a safe and healthy manner.

Recommended Reading:

- ◆ [Work Injuries Among Young Workers - Paper 184](#), Institute for Work and Health, April 2002
- ◆ [Newness and the Risk of Occupational Injury](#), Institute for Work and Health, Issue Briefing, May 2009

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Young Workers Zone (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety):
<http://www.ccohs.ca/youngworkers/>
- ◆ "Starting a new job" (Workers Safety & Insurance Board of Ontario):
<http://www.youngworker.ca/en/new-job.aspx>
- ◆ Young Workers Awareness Safety Program (Industrial Accident Prevention Association):
http://www.iapa.ca/Main/Outreach_yw/yw_intro.aspx
- ◆ Protecting Yourself – Tips for Young Workers (Ontario Ministry of Labour):
http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/hs/tips/tips_youngworkers.html

⁴ *How many employees receive safety training during the first year of a new job?*: Peter Smith & Cameron Mustard, Injury Prevention. IWH, 2007; 13: 37-41.

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