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Stephen Pegula
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Jill Janocha
Bureau of Labor Statistics

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Death on the Job: Fatal Work Injuries in 2011

Abstract

Even as government agencies, safety organizations, and employers strive to eliminate deaths at work, the latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) show that in the United States, an average of 13 workers die every day from injuries incurred on the job.

This issue of BEYOND THE NUMBERS summarizes the final 2011 data from CFOI and highlights some important historical trends as well.

Keywords

workplace safety, workplace fatalities, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI)

Comments

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Death on the job: fatal work injuries in 2011

Authors: Stephen Pegula and Jill Janocha

Even as government agencies, safety organizations, and employers strive to eliminate deaths at work, the latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) show that in the United States, an average of 13 workers die every day from injuries incurred on the job.¹

This issue of **BEYOND THE NUMBERS** summarizes the final 2011 data from CFOI and highlights some important historical trends as well.

Frequency of fatal injuries in the workplace

There were a total of 4,693 fatal work injuries in 2011. Fatal occupational injuries can occur anywhere and at any time. In 2011, at least one worker died from an at-work injury on each of the 365 days of the year.

Related articles

More BLS articles and information related to workplace injuries are available online at the following links:

- “Hispanic/Latino fatal occupational injury rates,” *Monthly Labor Review*, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/02/art2full.pdf>.
- “Injuries, illnesses, and fatal injuries in mining in 2010,” *Beyond the Numbers*, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-2/injuries-illnesses-and-fatal-injuries-in-mining-in-2010.htm>.
- “Facts of the catch: occupational injuries, illnesses, and fatalities to fishing workers, 2003–2009,” *Beyond the Numbers*, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-1/facts-of-the-catch-occupational-injuries-illnesses-and-fatalities-to-fishing-workers-2003-2009.htm>.

CFOI data show that workers are susceptible to a fatal injury while on the job.² Ten workers under the age of 16 died from an injury incurred at work in 2011. A total of 194 workers age 75 and older were killed including 5 older than age 90. Fatally injured workers were employed in over 240 distinct occupations and over 300 unique industries in 2011. Both private sector (4,188 fatal work injuries) and public sector employees (505 fatal work injuries) face daily hazards while on the job.

Trends over the last 20 years

BLS was charged with collecting data on workplace injuries, illnesses, and fatalities in the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.³ In the early 1990s, BLS began collecting detailed data on all fatal occupational injuries, and the first nationwide, comprehensive data on fatal occupational injuries were published on October 1, 1993, for the 1992 calendar year.

From 1992 to 2011, the total number of fatal work injuries and the published rate at which they occur both declined

markedly. During that period, the number of fatal work injuries peaked at 6,632 in 1994 and by 2011, the latest annual total declined to 4,693—the third-lowest year on record. In the first 5 years of CFOI (1992–1996), an average of 6,331 fatal occupational injuries was recorded. From 2007 to 2011, the average has decreased to 4,961 or by 22 percent.⁴

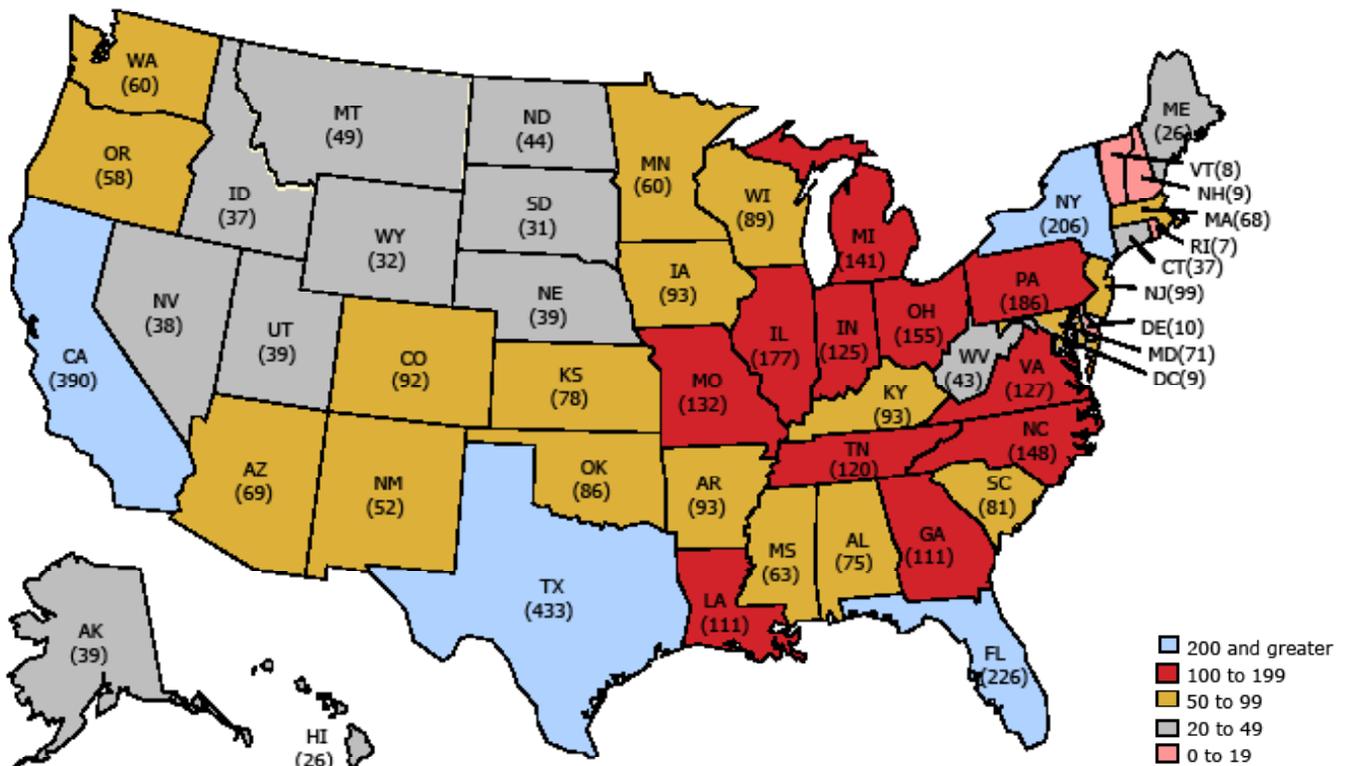
Fatal injury rates show the number of fatal occupational injuries per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers. Fatal occupational injury rates are also near the lowest rates since the CFOI series began. In the early 1990s, workers were killed at a rate of over 5 per 100,000 workers. In 2011, that rate was 3.5 per 100,000 workers.⁵

Where do fatal work injuries occur?

The number of fatal injuries per state in 2011 ranged from a low of 7 (Rhode Island) to a high of 433 (Texas). Chart 1 shows the distribution of fatal occupational injuries by state in 2011.

Chart 1

Number of fatal work injuries, by state, 2011



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Data are also available by metropolitan statistical area (MSA). MSAs can include counties from multiple states so they oftentimes provide a more localized view of fatal occupational injuries. In 2011, the three MSAs with the largest number of fatal occupational injuries were New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island (183), Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana (118), and Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown (105).⁶

Fatal injury rates, which are highlighted below, are available also by state for major industry sectors.

Disproportionate risks

Not all worker groups face the same risk of dying on the job. The fatal injury rates allow us to compare these worker groups while controlling for differences in employment in the groups. Certain types of workers and occupations consistently have fatal injury rates that are much higher than the average rate for all workers.

In 2011, men had a rate eight times the fatal injury rate compared with women and accounted for 92 percent of all deaths at work. The self-employed were over three times more likely than workers in general to be fatally injured while working. A large portion of the self-employed workers killed annually are from high fatal injury rate occupations like farmers, construction workers, motor vehicle operators, and landscapers. Starting at age 45, workers also faced an increasing likelihood of fatal injury as they advanced in age.

Workers of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity were killed more frequently than non-Hispanic White and non-Hispanic Black or African American workers. Foreign-born workers, particularly those of Hispanic or Latino descent, account for a large number of fatally injured workers. For more comparisons between foreign-born and native-born Hispanic or Latino fatal occupational injuries, see <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/02/art2full.pdf>.

Most of the variations in workplace fatal injuries are attributable to the industries and occupations in which these types of workers are employed.⁷ Some occupations consistently have higher fatal injury rates than those for workers in general.

In 2011, the fatal injury rates of fishers (127.3) and loggers (104.0) were approximately 25 times higher than the national fatal occupational injury rate of 3.5 per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers. Pilots, farmers, roofers, and drivers/sales workers and truck drivers also had fatal injury rates that exceeded the all-worker rate of 3.5 fatal occupational injuries per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers.

Conversely, healthcare, sales, and education workers consistently have published fatal injury rates below the national average.

Workplace homicides

The leading event that precipitated fatal work injuries in the United States in 2011 was roadway incidents (1,103 deaths). Falls to a lower level (553) ranked second and struck by object or equipment (476) ranked third as events leading to fatal injuries on the job. Homicide ranked fourth with 468 workers killed on the job.

Robbers were the assailants in 34 percent of the workplace homicides, the largest group of assailants. Co-workers or work associates of the deceased worker accounted for 10 percent of the assailants in homicides. Customers or clients were the assailants in 10 percent of the homicides, followed by relatives of the decedent at 8 percent.⁸

Although homicides accounted for 9 percent of fatal occupational injuries to men, they accounted for 20 percent to women. Relatives or domestic partners were the assailants in 38 percent of the homicides to women, compared with 2 percent of the workplace homicides involving men.

Federal agencies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) use CFOI data to identify the best ways to direct their resources to prevent deaths at work and devise strategies to ensure that every worker makes his or her way home safely each day. ■

This **BEYOND THE NUMBERS** was prepared by Stephen Pegula and Jill Janocha, economists, in the

Office of Compensation and Working Conditions, Washington, DC. Email: pegula.stephen@bls.gov and janocha.jill@bls.gov. For additional assistance, contact one of our information offices: National-Washington, DC: (202) 691-6170, TDD (800) 877-8339; Atlanta: (404) 893-4222; Boston: (617) 565-2327; Chicago: (312) 353-1880; Dallas: (972) 850-4800; Kansas City: (816) 285-7000; New York: (646) 264-3600; Philadelphia: (215) 597-3282; San Francisco: (415) 625-2270.

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Notes

1. Preliminary CFOI data are generally released approximately 8 months after the close of the calendar year. Revised and final CFOI data are generally released approximately 16 months after the close of the calendar year. Therefore, 2011 is the latest year of final data available. Preliminary 2012 data were released on August 22, 2013 and will be revised in the Spring of 2014.
2. For more information on fatal occupational injuries in 2011, see <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshcfoi1.htm#2011>.
3. For more information on how BLS collected data on fatal occupational injuries prior to CFOI and the genesis of CFOI, please see Chapter 9 of the BLS Handbook of Methods, which can be accessed here: <http://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/pdf/homch9.pdf>.
4. For more information on trends in fatal occupational injuries, see <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshcfoi1.htm>.
5. CFOI changed the way it calculated fatal injury rates in 2008 so these two figures are not perfectly comparable. See <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshnotice10.htm> for more information.
6. For more information on where fatal occupational injuries occur, see <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshstate.htm> (state counts and rates) and <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshcfoi1.htm#MSA> (MSA).
7. For more information on the risk of incurring a fatal injury on the job, see <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshcfoi1.htm#rates>.
8. For more information on workplace homicides, see <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshcfoi1.htm#other> and <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/cfoi/osar0016.htm>.

