

JUSTICE DEMANDS MORE

... A MORE ACCURATE PICTURE
—
of worker disability,
disease and death.

Claims allowed by Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) have become the default statistics shared by many when discussing the number of workers killed, injured or made ill each year by hazardous work.

Most deaths and many injuries and illnesses caused by exposure to work-related hazards are **never reported to, or recognized by the WSIB**. This is particularly the case for cancer and other occupational illnesses with long latency periods between workplace exposure(s) and disease onset.

A growing body of research evidence and the experiences of workers suggest underreporting and under recognition is extensive. This is likely also the case with COVID-19, both in terms of infections and deaths caused by workplace transmission. And definitely, the same is true of mental injuries, a significant and growing issue exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.

We need **to recognize a more accurate picture** of worker injuries, illnesses and deaths. This data is critical to inform the public, government regulators, employers and others of the true cost of unsafe and unhealthy work environments. This awareness may **lend urgency to workplace and regulatory actions** critical to the pursuit of prevention.

THE DISCONNECT

Estimated 2020 Ontario worker deaths as a result of hazardous exposures at work:

♦ **3,240** ♦

VS.

*WSIB-recognized 2020 Ontario worker death claims

324

Estimated 2020 Ontario worker injuries and illnesses as a result of hazardous exposures at work:*

♦ **310,000** ♦

VS.

*WSIB-recognized 2020 Ontario worker injury and illness claims

153,193

THE EVIDENCE

In a **2018 study**, University of Ottawa researchers suggest **a more accurate picture of worker deaths** would number between 9,800 and 13,200 Canadians — or 10 to 13 times higher than fatalities reported by Canadian compensation boards. So, for Ontario in 2020, using the lower percentage this would translate into 3,240 worker deaths. Although, whether one multiples by 10 or 13, **the report concludes, both are conservative estimates.**

Other research has long supported this truth. For instance, Dr. Annalee Yassi estimated 6,000 work-related deaths annually in Ontario from cancer, cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases alone (Occupational Disease and Worker Compensation in Ontario, 1983). Studies also suggest between **five and 16 per cent** of cancers are work-related. Based on these percentages and data provided by the **Canadian Cancer Society** between 1,555 and 4,976 Ontarians died in 2021 from work-related cancer.

A similar picture of underreporting has emerged for work-related injury and illness. University of Washington researchers **published evidence** in 2019 suggesting even the most conservative estimates indicate half of work-related injuries and illnesses are not accurately reported to the appropriate regulatory authority. In 2020, Ontario's Institute of Work and Health (IWH) **published study results** finding 64 per cent of injuries go unreported to a workers' compensation board. Most recently, **research led by IWH** found more than half of British Columbia workers missing two or more workdays as a result of an injury or disease did not submit a claim. Equally troubling, they found **overt or subtle action by the employer** that fits the researcher's definition of **claim suppression**. In June 2021, Dr. Cameron Mustard, then IWH president and senior scientist, **explained** "Somewhere between 40 and 60 per cent of potentially compensable conditions are typically not reported to provincial compensation authorities in Canada."

COVID-19 related claims are likely no different. As of March 31, 2022, the **WSIB recognized** 119 work-related deaths because of COVID exposures. Allowed lost-time COVID claims as of April 25, 2022, totalled more than 40,000. However, given the lack of access to testing throughout Ontario these numbers are sure to only represent a fraction of known cases. The **Ontario Science Table** estimated as of April 6, 2022, we were seeing 100,000 to 120,000 daily cases from all sources. At the same time, the Science Table tells us Ontario workplace mobility indicators were at the second highest since December 2020, surpassed only in November 2021.

***By the Numbers: 2020 WSIB Statistical Report** (Most recent data available, published on the WSIB website as of April 25, 2022).

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