



## Young workers — Facts and figures

### Exposure to risks and health effects

This report summarises a European Risk Observatory report (1) describing health and safety at work as related to a specific risk, sector or group of workers. It is part of a larger project, whose goal is the earlier identification of emerging trends and risks at work in order to assist in better targeting of resources and to enable more timely and effective interventions.

Existing studies looking at occupational risks faced by young people have some methodological problems (2). Under-reporting may occur due to young workers' lack of knowledge of the reporting process and hesitation to report hazards and risks. Statistics at the EU level broken down by age and specific data on exposure of young workers (3) are also hard to obtain, especially concerning the sectors and occupations in which they are mostly employed. This is the case in the services, hospitality and retail sectors in particular. There are also a number of confounding factors. For example, the highest rates of workers being exposed to noise are in construction, industry, agriculture and transport, while the highest absolute numbers of workers exposed are in the tertiary sector (sales, personal services, education, health and social work).

Therefore this report uses non-comparable data, examples from one Member State only, one-off studies, and studies from outside national official data to fill in the gaps and show some of the complexity of the situation of young workers' exposure to risk.

#### Exposure to risk

European and some national sources suggest that young workers are more exposed to the following physical work factors — noise, vibrations, heat and cold, and the handling of dangerous substances.

Young people working in hotels and restaurants and construction are especially exposed to loud noise. Young workers are also particularly susceptible to acoustic shock injuries because they form a large part of the call centre workforce.



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Exposure to heat is common in outdoor occupations (agriculture or construction), industry, and hotels and restaurants.

Dangerous substances appear in various occupational settings where young workers are employed: they include agricultural and construction chemicals, cleaning products, petrol, solvents and hairdressing products.

According to survey results from EU and national sources, physically demanding work factors (such as working in awkward positions, handling heavy loads, and repetitive work) seem to be more common among young workers than in the average workforce. As a result, young workers are at considerable risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders (including low back pain). Surveys also suggest that young workers seem to be less informed about occupational risks.

As the pace of life and work continues to increase in today's world, young people are increasingly having to work to tight deadlines and at very high speed. And even though surveys suggest that they work fewer hours than the average working population, young people do more shift work and have more irregular working hours.

Young workers are also more likely to report being the subject of unwanted sexual attention. Young women with precarious jobs in the hotel and service industry are many times more likely to be exposed to sexual harassment.

#### Health outcomes

##### Non-fatal accidents

National and European data suggest that young workers are at greater risk of having an occupational accident. Nevertheless, accident rates and causes of accidents vary greatly between different sectors and occupations. According to the latest European data (4), the incidence rate of non-fatal accidents at work was more than 40 % higher among those aged 18–24. Young men especially appear to be a risk group for safety at work.

##### Fatal accidents

According to EU figures, young workers have lower overall fatal accident rates. These results are in line with evidence from all over the world.

Nevertheless, fatal accident rates of young workers can be considerable in some sectors. Agriculture has the highest incidence, followed by construction, transport and communication, and manufacturing. Construction is the sector with the highest number of young worker

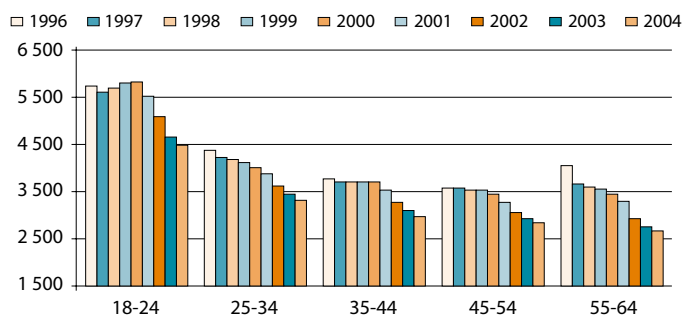
(1) <http://osha.europa.eu/publications/reports/7606507>

(2) Breslin, F. C., Day, D., Tompa, E., Irvin, E., Bhattacharyya, S., Clarke, J., Wang, A., *Systematic review of risk factors for work injury among youth*, Toronto: Institute for Work and Health, 2005.

(3) Young workers: 15–24 years old.

(4) European Statistics for Accidents at Work (ESAW).

(5) Agriculture; Manufacturing; Electricity, gas and water supply; Construction; Wholesale and retail, repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and personal and household goods; Hotels and restaurants; Transport, storage and communication; Financial intermediation; Real estate, renting and business activities.



Standardised incidence rate of accidents 1996–2004 (more than three days lost, per 100 000 workers, nine main branches (°), ESAW)

fatalities. Moreover, it is a worrying fact that fatalities due to violence in retail are also increasing in some countries, making up a high proportion of fatalities among women in this sector.

### Occupational diseases and health problems

Young workers have a lower average risk of developing occupational diseases than older workers. Occupational diseases often need a cumulative exposure and/or latency period to develop and may not always be recognised due to short-term work contracts.

According to the European Occupational Diseases Statistics (EODS), the top five occupational diseases among workers aged 15–35 years are allergic reactions, irritation of the skin, pulmonary disorders, infectious diseases and musculoskeletal disorders. In 1999, 86.5 % of all self-reported health problems that were due to pulmonary disorders, and caused more than two weeks' absence, were reported by young workers under 25. Nearly half of all self-reported health problems due to stress, depression and anxiety, and which cause more than two weeks' absence, were reported by young workers under 25 (48.9 %).

Although these results do not show the precise figures for young workers, they give an indication. As an example, dermatitis, upper limb disorders and stress are some of the predominant causes of work-related illness in retail.

### Prevention and research needs

Possible reasons for higher occupational accident rates and the health problems identified above include young workers' lack of experience, their physical and psychological immaturity and lack of awareness of health and safety issues, and the failure of employers to allow for these factors by providing appropriate training, supervision and safeguards,



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and by placing young people in work situations that are appropriate to them. Work-related risks to young workers need to be taken seriously. Many of the risk factors are still being seen as inherent to their risk-taking behaviour or the temporal nature of

their involvement in work. Specific targeted measures need to be taken in education and training as well as in daily workplace practice.

Some research also indicates that rehabilitation measures might be less targeted towards young workers, and lower recuperation times of young workers might also indicate a lack of awareness about the risks they are exposed to and their consequences.



Knowing where young people are working suggests that these sectors should be targeted for help on their occupational safety and health (OSH) training and prevention. Knowing which are their main health risks also implies that employers and young workers need awareness raising about these health risks.

Some recommendations for research and practice:

- target sectors where young workers are most at risk;
- target the most prevalent risks for awareness raising among employers and the young workers themselves;
- target employment agencies to raise awareness about the risks to which young workers are exposed;
- train inspectors about where most young workers are employed and which risks they face;
- take account of the specific needs of specific groups of young workers (male/female, migrant, etc.);
- pay special attention to part-timers and temporary workers. Advice should mention the importance of special attention to young workers and specific guidance should be given to employers, inspectors and preventive services;
- include young workers' issues in guidelines on shiftworking;
- refocus rehabilitation and employability policies for injured workers to include young workers;
- include OSH in education. This is particularly important for those entering precarious jobs, who receive less training at work and are hard to reach.

### More information

The report also contributes to the Agency's annual campaign, which in 2006 was dedicated to the protection of young people at work. Under the slogan 'Safe start', over 30 countries participate actively in Europe's largest OSH campaign to protect young workers.

Information on employment and the main sectors employing young workers is summarised in Facts 69: **Young workers — Facts and Figures: Youth employment.**

Further information on young worker safety is available at:

<http://ew2006.osha.europa.eu/>.

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