



# Work-related injury underreporting among young workers: Prevalence, gender differences, and explanations for underreporting<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Although notifying an employer of a lost-time work-related injury is a legal requirement in many jurisdictions, employees frequently do not report such injuries. **Method:** Based on data from 21,345 young part-time Canadian workers (55% male), we found that 21% of respondents had experienced at least one lost-time injury, with about half reporting the injury to an employer and a doctor. **Results:** Respondents provided 10 reasons for avoiding reporting lost-time injuries, with perceived low severity of the injury, negative reactions of others, and ambiguity about whether work caused the injury as the most common ones. Additional analysis of these categories revealed that young males cited concern about their self-identity as a reason for not reporting an injury more often than young females did. We discuss the findings in terms of implications for management practice (i.e., educating young workers about accurate injury reporting) and public policy. **Practical applications:** Targeted campaigns should be developed for young workers, especially young male workers, who are less likely to report injuries than young female workers, to understand the importance of and to encourage injury reporting.

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## 1. Introduction

Preventing work-related injuries among young workers (i.e., workers aged 15 to 24 years) is a public policy priority in many countries because this age cohort, and in particular young males, experiences the highest rate of workplace injuries (Salminen, 2004; Santana, Villaveces, Bangdiwala, Runyan, & Albuquerque-Oliveira, 2012). Access to accurate statistics on work-related injuries is essential for developing effective injury prevention programs; however, research involving workers of all ages shows that underreporting of injuries is prevalent. Studies have found that between 29% and 81% of work-related injuries and illnesses go unreported by employees (e.g., Erickson & Williams-Evans, 2000; Pransky, Snyder, Dembe, & Himmelstein, 1999; Probst, Brubaker, & Barsotti, 2008; Rosenman et al., 2006; Shannon & Lowe, 2002). For instance, in a random sample of 2,500 Canadian adults, Shannon and Lowe (2002) found that 143

respondents had experienced an injury that was eligible for workers' compensation; yet, of the 143 respondents, 57% did not file a workers' compensation claim.

The current study explores work-related injury underreporting in a large sample of young, part-time Canadian workers. The goals of the study are, first, to provide an estimate of the prevalence of lost-time work injuries in this population, and, second, to understand the prevalence of reporting these lost-time work injuries to employers and physicians. We are interested in particular in prevalence and types of reporting by participant gender, as young males are most often injured in the workplace (Breslin & Smith, 2005), and additionally the way that young males communicate safety concerns, such as reporting workplace injuries, may differ from young females (Breslin, Polzer, MacEachen, Morrongiello, & Shannon, 2007).

### 1.1. The importance of accurate work-related injury reporting

In most countries, employees are required to report all work-related injuries to their employer. Although variance exists across jurisdictions, employers must keep records of all work-related injuries, produce an annual report of all work-related injuries, and report more severe work-related injuries to the appropriate government agency (e.g., Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). Injuries that require modified work, medical treatment, or lost-time from work are eligible for workers' compensation benefits (Shannon & Lowe, 2002),

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a claim for which can be initiated by the injured worker, the workers' physician, or the employer.

Without accurate statistics on workplace injuries, employers cannot identify and begin to properly manage health and safety issues (Azaroff, Levenstein, & Wegman, 2002). By not understanding the nature of injuries, organizations threaten the long-term health and safety of their workers (Probst et al., 2008), risk incurring rising workers' compensation premium rates, and increased employee turnover (Harrell, 1999), among other undesirable consequences. At a public policy level, accurate statistics on work-related injuries are important for setting insurance premiums, comparing injury trends across occupational groups and jurisdictions, developing appropriate injury prevention interventions, and, more broadly, assessing the need for changes to legislation (Shannon & Lowe, 2002). Underreporting of work-related injuries also has financial consequences for workers and employers. When eligible work-related injuries are not reported to workers' compensation boards, the medical costs are paid by a public health care system or private insurers (Thompson, 2007). Lastly, if workers withhold reports of work-related injuries in their teenaged years, the practice may continue into adulthood and perpetuate the negative consequences of underreporting.

### 1.2. Individual and organizational factors related to injury underreporting

Research has examined the influence of both individual and organizational factors on injury reporting behavior of workers. We begin with individual factors including injury severity, gender, and age. Studies have consistently found that injury severity is strongly related to claim submission, with more severe injuries being more likely to be reported (e.g., Alamgir, Koehoorn, Ostry, Tompa, & Demers, 2006; Shannon & Lowe, 2002). In terms of gender, the evidence is mixed. For example, Biddle, Roberts, Rosenman, and Welch's (1998) study of 18,297 workers found that female workers were 50% more likely than male workers to file a workers' compensation claim, whereas other studies find no statistical difference in reporting based on gender (e.g., Shannon & Lowe, 2002).

Research tends to show that reporting increases with age. Biddle et al. (1998) reported a small but statistically significant positive effect between age and reporting such that reporting increases until workers reached their mid-40s. Furthermore, Galizzi, Miesmaa, Punnett, and Slatin's (2010) qualitative study indicated that younger nurses were less likely to report work-related injuries because they do not fully understand the longer term impact of injuries.

Several organizational factors, such as industry sector, safety climate, and job insecurity, are also related to injury underreporting. Certain industries like health care, hospitality, agriculture, and construction (Daniels & Marlow, 2005), smaller organizations (Oleinick, Gluck, & Guire, 1995), and workplaces in which employees experience job insecurity (Probst, Barbaranelli, & Petitta, 2013) – all characteristics of workplaces where a large proportion of young workers are represented (e.g., Galarneau, 2005; Marshall, 2007) – have higher rates of underreporting. However, Shannon and Lowe (2002) found that permanent and temporary workers were equally likely to submit a workers' compensation claim. They attributed these findings to the strong economy at the time of their study, which allowed temporary workers to easily obtain another job if they were disciplined for injury reporting.

Probst et al.'s (2008) study of U.S. construction companies found that firms with a poor safety climate (defined as a workplace in which management and supervisors do not place a priority on safety) failed to report over 80% of eligible injuries to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration compared to companies with a positive safety climate in which 47% of eligible injuries remained unreported. Relatedly, fear of employer reprisal and organizational policies also affect injury reporting. A report by the United States Government Accountability Office (2009) concluded that workers, employers, and health

practitioners all experience pressure to avoid reporting work-related injuries and illnesses. These stakeholders stated that workers' fear of disciplinary action and safety incentive programs that reward low injury rates are common disincentives for reporting. Finally, Galizzi et al. (2010) found that almost one-third of respondents were concerned that applying for workers' compensation could lead to discrimination, missed promotions, or job loss. Young workers in particular, who are typically employed in low-wage, contingent positions, may not be able to afford the partial wage replacement, the delay in payment, or the possibility of a rejected claim (Azaroff et al., 2002).

### 1.3. Work-related injury underreporting among young workers

Although extensive research has been conducted on injury underreporting (our review of the literature uncovered 23 studies of the issue published before 2013), almost no research has focused on underreporting among young workers. One exception is an unpublished report by Hall, Gerard, and Toldo (2011) which surveyed 439 Canadian university students, mostly aged 16 to 24. The authors found that 13% of participants had experienced at least one work-related injury that required time away from work and 62% of this group indicated that one or more of their injuries were not reported even though they had lost time from work. Common reasons for not reporting work-related injuries included the following: unaware they were supposed to report all injuries (52%), thought the injury was too minor to report (42%), thought the injury was their fault (25%), and concern about being disciplined (18%). A limitation of Hall et al.'s (2011) study is that it was conducted with a relatively small sample of university students (primarily 18 to 24 year olds) and thus the rates and reasons for injury underreporting may not be representative of the experiences of young workers.

The current study addresses this issue with data from a large representative sample of young workers. In addition, we explore two targets of injury underreporting: employers and doctors. While we anticipate finding evidence of the above-mentioned reasons for underreporting (e.g., injury severity, employer responses to injuries), our study considers the relative importance of such factors and explores differences between young males and young females in terms of the explanations for injury non-reporting. We consider the impact of gender because research has found that young males experience more injuries than young females (Breslin & Smith, 2005), and young males and young females may communicate safety concerns differently (Breslin et al., 2007).

## 2. Method

Participants were 21,345 (55% male) primarily 15 to 25 year olds who responded to a short survey at the beginning of Passport to Safety™ (PS), a Canadian on-line occupational safety test. PS<sup>1</sup> offers several on-line educational tests that aim to raise awareness about workplace safety by helping young people understand their rights and responsibilities, hazards in the workplace, and related topics. The most popular test is the PS Challenge for Teens, which accounts for about 85% of PS annual test takers. Since it was established in 2004, hundreds of thousands of young Canadians have taken the Challenge for Teens test as part of their high school curriculum. The majority of test-takers are from the province of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, where the test was first adopted as an optional component in high school curriculum.

### 2.1. Procedure

The short user survey appeared at the beginning of the six PS tests between October 2011 and the end of June 2012. High school teachers who wish to use the test in their classes acquire unique personal

<sup>1</sup> For more information about PS, please see [www.passporttosafety.com](http://www.passporttosafety.com).

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