

Issues



Shifting Work Force Spawns New Set of Hazardous Occupations

U.S. Department of Labor
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Shifting Work Force Spawns New Set of Hazardous Occupations

Fifty years ago, the phrase “injury at work” typically conjured up visions of coal miners, steelworkers, or other hazardous, male-dominated occupations. Back then, half the Nation’s work force was working on farms, factory floors, construction locations, and mining sites. Those were the places—collectively called “goods-producing” industries—where most serious injuries occurred.

Mention “injury at work” today and very different images might appear. Nowadays, the large majority of American workers are employed in “service-producing” industries, where they warehouse and transport goods rather than produce them, or where they deliver services, for example, as employees of stores, restaurants, cable TV companies, and health care institutions. Service-producing industries are where most injuries presently occur. They are also the worksites where virtually all job growth is expected between 1992 and 2005, according to BLS projections; therefore, they are the places where most workers are likely to remain in harm’s way as we enter the next millennium.

Given the changed landscape of work and workers, what are the occupations of the 1990s within which workers commonly sustain serious injuries? This question could not be addressed fully until 1992, when BLS launched its first nationwide study of who was disabled on the job and how it happened. Based on that study’s findings, the accompanying chart lists the 10 occupations with the most injuries and illnesses involving days away from work. Together, their 734,000 cases accounted for a substantial share (nearly a third) of all 2.3 million

cases serious enough to require some time away from work.

Service-producing activities dominate high-hazard list

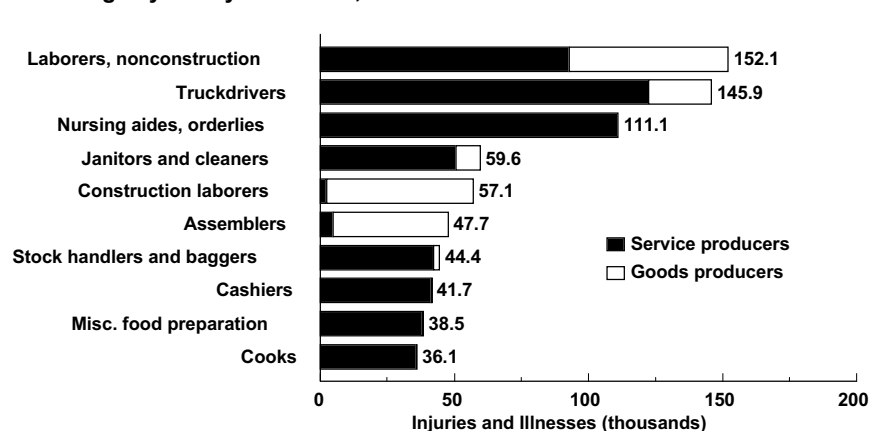
All but 2 of the 10 high-hazard occupations had close ties to the service-producing activities of their employers, as the chart shows. Injured truckers, for example, primarily hauled for trucking services and wholesalers while nursing aides chiefly cared for patients in hospitals or nursing homes. Similarly, injured cashiers commonly helped customers check out groceries or general merchandise. The two exceptions were construction laborers, who almost always sustained their injuries on construction sites, and assemblers injured typically while putting together products on factory floors.

One unwanted byproduct of the employment shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries is that

women workers, nine-tenths of whom work in the latter industries, now make up about one-third of all serious, nonfatal injuries and illnesses. Moreover, their share of total cases was much larger for several of the hazardous jobs in the accompanying table: About 40 percent for injured assemblers and cooks; nearly 50 percent for various kitchen-related jobs; over 75 percent for cashiers; and nearly 90 percent for nursing aides and orderlies.

Clearly, work injuries no longer border on being the sole province of working men. Their two-thirds share of such serious injuries, in fact, might diminish somewhat if the service-producing sector proves to be the dominant job creator of the early 21st century. That might happen partly because men compose a slightly smaller share of work injuries in service-producing industries (57 percent in 1992) than their two-thirds share of all private industries.

Occupations with the most injuries and illnesses involving days away from work, 1992



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual Survey, 1992

Occupations with the most injuries and illnesses involving days away from work, selected characteristics, 1992

| Occupation | Total cases (000's) | Women as a percent of total | Service producers' share of total |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Laborers, nonconstruction | 152.1 | 15 | 61 |
| Truckdrivers | 145.9 | 4 | 84 |
| Nursing aides, orderlies | 111.1 | 88 | 100 |
| Janitors and cleaners | 59.6 | 32 | 84 |
| Construction laborers | 57.1 | 3 | 4 |
| Assemblers | 47.7 | 40 | 10 |
| Stock handlers/baggers | 44.4 | 29 | 95 |
| Cashiers | 41.7 | 77 | 99 |
| Misc. food preparation | 38.5 | 49 | 99 |
| Cooks | 36.1 | 42 | 99 |

NOTE: "Service producers" include private employers in transportation and public utilities; wholesale and retail trade; finance, insurance, and real estate; and services.

"Goods producers" include private employers in agriculture, forestry, and fishing; mining; construction; and manufacturing industries.

About the work injury data

The 1992 BLS survey of serious, nonfatal injuries and illnesses was the first nationwide study of its kind to identify workers most at risk and the risks themselves.

"Most at risk" is defined in the survey as worker groups cited with the largest

number of cases involving days away from work. No incidence rate for workers most at risk is computed, however, because the survey does not measure the degree of exposure to such risks for specific groups of workers.

The "risks" are described in four ways: The disabling condition, part of the body

affected, the event or exposure associated with the incident, and the source producing the disabling condition. Besides identifying the "who and how" of serious work injuries, the study also permits a look at injury and illness severity as measured by the duration of cases involving days away from work for various groups of workers, including the 10 high-hazard occupations. Finally, the study enables researchers to analyze a specific injury or illness in some detail, for example overexertion while lifting, using data on worker demographics, case characteristics, and case severity.

For more information on this study contact, the Office of Safety, Health and Working Conditions, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2 Massachusetts Ave., NE., Room 3180, Washington, DC 20212-0001, (202) 606-6304. Information in this report is available to sensory impaired individuals upon request. Voice phone: (202) 606-7828, TDD phone (202) 606-5897, TDD message referral phone: 1-800-326-2577.

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