Fatal Work-Related Injuries
Southeastern United States, 2008-2011

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Abstract: In 2008, the work-related injury fatality rate was 3.8 per 100,000 workers in the United States but was 5.2 per 100,000 workers for the southeast region. Work-related fatalities in the southeast were examined for the period 2008 to 2011. Median work-related injury fatality rates are reported for the southeast region, each of the 12 states, and the United States. The percentages of employees in high fatality industries and work-related fatalities by cause were calculated. Finally, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s database was searched for fatality reports. States with the highest rates (per 100,000 workers) included Arkansas (7.2), Louisiana (6.8), and West Virginia (6.6). Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia each had more than 20% of their employees in high fatality industries. Forty percent of work-related injury fatalities were from transportation incidents in the southeast and the United States. Future analyses should include work-related injury fatality rates by industry and compare rates with other U.S. regions.

Keywords: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), government regulation, occupational injury fatalities, safety, health promotion, workforce

In the early morning hours of a summer day in 2012, a 49-year-old male owner-operator of a Kentucky towing company died when he was struck by a driver operating a box truck. While the towing company owner and his two sons were on an interstate returning with an SUV, the operator thought the load felt strange. He parked his tow truck on the right-hand shoulder and was standing on the driver's side at the rear of the trailer checking the load's securement, when a box truck in the right lane struck him. Emergency medical services arrived, followed by the coroner who declared the towing operator dead at the scene. The cause of death was due to massive head and chest injuries resulting from being struck by the motor vehicle (Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center, 2013).

Each year, more than 4,000 workers die from work-related injuries in the United States (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH], 2010). A report of work-related injury deaths for 2008 indicated the rate was 3.8 per 100,000 workers in the United States overall, but was higher, 5.2 per 100,000 workers, in 12 southeastern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia; Southeastern States Occupational Health Network [SouthON], 2012). Because work-related deaths are preventable, the SouthON is focused on developing common priorities for collaborative surveillance and for informing policies. To encourage public health professionals, occupational safety and health professionals, and company safety representatives to identify intervention priorities, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) NIOSH and state partners examined work-related injury fatalities in SouthON states, compared with the United States, for the period 2008 to 2011.

Method

To characterize fatal, work-related injuries, methods provided by the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists’ Guide for Tracking Occupational Health Conditions and Their Determinants (Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, 2013) were used to evaluate data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’(BLS) Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFI0) and Geographic Profile of Employment and Unemployment. CFI0 uses multiple sources, including death certificates, workers’ compensation reports, medical examiner records, news stories,
Mining Safety and Health Administration fatality reports, and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fatality reports (BLS, 2012) to provide a census of work-related fatal injuries. The Geographic Profile of Employment and Unemployment includes data from the Current Population Survey, a survey of about 50,000 households, which is used to estimate employment and unemployment numbers for each state (BLS, 2001). Using these data, median fatality rates from work-related injuries are reported for each of the 12 SouthON states, the 12 states as a whole, and the entire United States. Median fatality rates were used rather than the average over the 4-year time period because some states had wide ranges of worker-related injury fatality rates. The percentage of work-related fatalities by cause is also reported: transportation incidents, contact with objects and equipment, assaults and violent acts, falls, exposure to harmful substances or environments, and fires and explosions. Finally, the percentage of employees in high fatality industries, which include agriculture, construction, mining (including oil and gas), and transportation, was calculated by state for the period 2008 to 2011. The OSHA fatality database was also searched for reports from states with higher work-related fatal injuries in high mortality risk industries. No tests for statistical significance were performed.

Results

During 2008 to 2011, the median annual fatality rate for work-related injuries from the 12 states in SouthON was 4.8 per 100,000 workers; the rate for the entire United States was 3.5 per 100,000 workers (Table 1). The SouthON states with the highest rates included Arkansas (7.2 per 100,000 workers), Louisiana (6.8), and West Virginia (6.6). An additional 6 SouthON states also had a higher rate than the United States as a whole: Mississippi (6.3 per 100,000 workers), Kentucky (6.7), Tennessee (6.8), Alabama (6.7), South Carolina (6.3), and North Carolina (6.3). Only Virginia (3.4), Florida (3.1), and Georgia (2.7) had rates lower than the United States (Figure 1). The SouthON states with the highest work-related injury fatality rates also had the highest median percentages of employees in high fatality industries for the period 2008 to 2011 (Table 2). The percentage of work-related injury fatalities due to transportation incidents was similar for the SouthON states and the United States, approximating 40% of fatalities. The percentage of work-related injury fatalities due to other causes in the SouthON region differed little from rates in the United States (Table 3).

Work-related fatality reports based on worker fatalities reported to federal and state OSHA can be found on the OSHA website (2015). Following are such reports of work-related injury fatalities from states with higher fatality rates and a high percentage of employees in high fatality industries. One fatality report from 2008 described a work-related fatality in the construction industry in Louisiana. Employees were restarting a recovery boiler under a partial-natural-draft. The power boiler was not online at the time and exploded. One employee was blown over a standard guard railing on the sixth floor. He fell down some 25 feet on a scaffold staging and died from blunt force trauma to the chest. His injuries included lacerations to his lungs, diaphragm, liver, and thoracic aorta (OSHA, 2008).

Another fatality report described the death of a migrant farm worker in the agriculture industry in Arkansas. In 2010, the employee had been working in a tomato packing warehouse for several months. After a 4-day work period, he was found unconscious in a shaded area. The employee was transported by coworkers to a local hospital, where he arrived with a temperature of 108 degrees. He died from heat exhaustion the following day (OSHA, 2010).

Discussion

Nine of 12 SouthON states had a higher median work-related injury fatality rate than the U.S. rate of 3.5 per 100,000 workers. One of the reasons for this elevated rate might be that workers in the southeastern states work in high fatality industries. The SouthON states with the highest work-related injury fatality rates also had the highest median percentage of employees from high fatality industries. Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia each have more than 20% of employees in these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Median annual fatality ratea</th>
<th>Rangea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.3-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All SouthON states</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.7-7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.0-5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.4-8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLb</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.9-3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAb</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.6-4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KY</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.0-5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.2-7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.5-6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.4-3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.6-4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.5-5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAb</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.8-4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>5.7-13.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aPer 100,000 workers
bStates with worker fatality rates lower than the U.S. rate
Individuals working in agriculture, construction, mining, and transportation are at higher risk for work-related fatalities than workers in other industries within the United States (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 2013). Caution should be used when comparing fatality rates from work-related injuries by state as workforce characteristics vary.


### Table 2. Median Percentage of Employed Persons in High Mortality Risk Industries by Location—2008-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KY</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. High mortality risk industries include agriculture, construction, mining, and transportation (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 2013).*

### Table 3. Percentage of Work-Related Fatalities by Cause—2008-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation incidents</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with objects and equipment</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assaults and violent acts</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falls</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to harmful substances or environments</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fires and explosions</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Total percentage may not equal 100% due to rounding.*

industries. Individuals working in agriculture, construction, mining, and transportation are at higher risk for work-related fatalities than workers in other industries within the United States (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 2013). Caution should be used when comparing fatality rates from work-related injuries by state as workforce characteristics vary.
(e.g., demographics), and industry employment vary from state to state. For example, a common industry in the southeast in
2011 was health care and social assistance (data not shown).
West Virginia, which has a work-related injury fatality rate of 6.6
per 100,000 workers, has 22% of its workforce in this industry.
Georgia, which has only 13% of its workforce in health care and
social assistance, has a work-related injury fatality rate of 2.7 per
100,000 workers. In this particular instance, industry
employment differences might account for variances in
work-related fatality rates; however, caution should be used
when making these comparisons, because it is possible that no
correlation actually exists.

Implications for Practice

NIOSH currently funds four regional occupational safety and
health education and research centers (ERC; Kentucky, North
Carolina, Florida, and Alabama) and an agricultural center
(Kentucky) in the southeast region. Center staff collect industry-
specific and total industry injury and illness surveillance data,
conduct research, engage in public health practice, and educate
the next generation of occupational health researchers and
practitioners. The funded SouthON states are addressing the
elevated work-related injury fatality rates of these southeastern
states by using occupational health indicators to identify and track
risk factors and implement priority interventions. North Carolina
and Kentucky both have occupational health-related objectives in
their states’ versions of Healthy People 2020.

In addition, Kentucky’s Injury Prevention and Research Center
has published several epidemiologic studies that identify risk
factors associated with transportation incidents to facilitate
implementation of prevention measures (Bunn, Slavova, & Hall,
2008; Bunn, Slavova, & Robertson, 2012, 2013). The case study at
the beginning of this article described a motor vehicle crash in
which the owner-operator of a towing company died when he was
struck by a driver operating a box truck (Kentucky Injury
Prevention and Research Center, 2013). The report outlined several
recommendations based on investigation findings. To prevent
similar incidents, the report included recommendations that
Kentucky create a law requiring the use of portable emergency
warning devices when an emergency vehicle is stopped at the side
of the road and that employers and tow truck operators ensure the
use of warning devices to alert approaching motorists whenever a
worker is outside of the tow truck.

Conclusion

SouthON provides a mechanism for diverse partners in the
southeastern United States to work together to address these
occupational safety and health issues.

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Conflict of Interest

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