

Workplace safety program can reduce injuries if aggressively enforced, study finds

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A longstanding California occupational safety program requiring all businesses to eliminate workplace hazards can help prevent injuries to workers, but only if it is adequately enforced, according to a new study by the RAND Corporation.

The first-ever evaluation of the California Injury and Illness [Prevention Program](#) found evidence that the program reduces workplace injuries, but only at businesses that had been cited for not addressing the regulation's more-specific safety mandates.

"We found the safety effects to be real, but not very large," said John Mendeloff, lead author of the study and a senior [public policy](#) researcher for RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "We think that the most important reason for the limited impact of this program is that inspectors often did not go beyond a review of the employer's written document."

When California Division of Occupational Safety and Health inspectors did investigate further and found failures to comply with provisions to train workers, identify and abate hazards, and investigate injury causes, the average injury rates at targeted businesses declined more than 20 percent in the following two years, Mendeloff said.

However, these provisions were cited in only about 5 percent of Cal-OSHA inspections, RAND researchers found. In the other 20 percent of inspections where a violation of the rule was cited, it was only for the section requiring the employer have a written program. Such a violation

carries an average penalty of \$150.

The California Injury and Illness Prevention Program, which became effective in 1991, requires all employers to adopt certain procedures. These include communicating to employees about risks, carrying out regular workplace surveys and abating the hazards that are found, training employees about how to work safely, and investigating the causes of the injuries that occur. In contrast, almost all other [safety standards](#) address specific hazards -- for example, those dealing with protection against falls.

The program has been the most frequently violated Cal-OSHA standard in every year since 1991, being cited in about 25 percent of all inspections. The California program is also one possible model for federal OSHA's current rule-making effort to develop a safety and health program rule.

The RAND study notes that higher penalties for noncompliance with the program and more extensive activities to make employers aware of their obligations could enhance compliance. However, two other approaches could have a greater impact: having inspectors conduct more in-depth assessments of employer programs and having inspectors link the violations they find and the injuries that have occurred to the program by asking "Why weren't these prevented by your Injury and Illness Prevention Program?"

The study found that employers who were cited for violations of the Injury and Illness Prevention Program in one inspection usually came into compliance in future inspections. However, the overall percentage of inspections finding program violations did not change over time.

Moreover, the percentage of first-time inspections finding violations was the same in 2007 as it was in 1993. These findings indicate that

information about the program requirements failed to reach many employers, they failed to be convinced to comply by the threat of penalties, or both.

The 20 percent reduction in injuries following citations for the specific requirements of the California Injury and Illness Prevention Program translates to about 1 injury per year at a workplace with 100 employees. Most estimates of the value of preventing a work injury are in the range of \$15,000 to \$50,000. The RAND study did not find evidence that the statewide workplace fatality rate had decreased after the introduction of the program standard.

The study of injury effects was carried out using several different injury data sets. In all cases, inspections were included in the data if "before and after" [injury](#) rates could be obtained for the inspected business. The study was limited to workplaces in the manufacturing, transportation, utilities, wholesale trade and health care sectors. It included inspections through 2006.

More information: The study, "An Evaluation of the California Injury and Illness Prevention Program," can be found at www.rand.org

Provided by RAND Corporation

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