

Unreported data for workplace injuries

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Accidents leading to work injuries cost an estimated \$57 billion in Australia and new research from the University of South Australia shows workplaces are unlikely to be adequately addressing injury prevention because management decisions are informed by inaccurate data.

Reporting of [workplace injuries](#) appears to be a bit like an iceberg – there is a lot going on underneath that is not reported. The University's Asia Pacific Centre for Work Health and Safety study linked confidential surveys of hospital employees to register-reported injuries and found a large discrepancy.

Lead researcher Amy Zadow says on average, only four per cent of work injuries were registered compared to those reported in the confidential survey.

Survey results revealed 66 staff experienced one or more physical work injuries while 63 experienced one or more psychological work injuries (for example post-traumatic stress disorder following a violent encounter or depression arising from work pressure).

"Workers were much less likely to report psychological injuries with 73 per cent of physical work injuries reported compared to just 35 per cent of psychological injuries," Zadow says.

"Despite roughly equal numbers of physical and psychological work injuries, there is greater unreported psychological harm."

The UniSA study revealed employees in work units with a poor climate for psychological [health](#) had more work injuries and were less likely to report their injuries.

"This study is unique because existing research focuses almost exclusively on physical injuries, rather than in combination with psychological incidents," Zadow says.

"Research across Australia and Malaysia shows that the psychosocial safety climate – which we refer to as PSC – in organisations is typically lower than physical safety climate indicating a lack of priority given to [workplace](#) psychological health."

This accords with the Productivity Commission, which found that psychosocial factors at work are not given the same attention in legislation and by health and safety inspectors as physical hazards.

"The mechanism we proposed was that PSC, emanating from senior managers and transmitted through teams, was the origin of psychological health problems such as emotional exhaustion, that culminated in greater work injuries and underreporting of injuries," Zadow says.

"By contrast, workplaces with a high PSC – where management cared for and supported the psychological health of workers – had less injuries and workers were more likely to report any incidents, so issues could be addressed and treated early."

Zadow has recently completed a PhD addressing the wider topic of psychosocial [safety](#) climate across organisations. She reports that modern workers are often given temporary work and put under work pressure with the expectation that they can be "thrown away" and replaced when they wear out. Zadow's research proposes that workplaces that promote caring environments and protect and nurture the [psychological health](#) of their workers experience much greater benefits including less [work](#) injuries, and more engaged and productive workers.

Provided by University of South Australia

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