

Majority of mining-related injuries and illness in Illinois go unreported

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Credit: University of Illinois at Chicago

Illnesses and injuries associated with working in Illinois mines are substantially underreported to the federal agency tasked with tracking these events, according to a new study published in the *American Journal*

of Industrial Medicine.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration requires reporting of injuries and [illness](#) sustained while working in [mines](#) in the U.S. But according to previous research, their reporting program, called the Part 50 program, did not effectively capture cases of injury in Kentucky, spurring concerns about underreporting in other states.coal miner

In 2015, Illinois ranked fourth among the 50 states in coal production, with 23 coal mines producing 56,101,000 short tons of coal (a short ton is 2,000 pounds). That year, there were 4,171 workers employed in the mining industry in Illinois, according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration. Mining remains hazardous and is associated with an increased risk for injury, as well as several [health](#) conditions, including chronic [obstructive pulmonary disease](#), emphysema and black lung disease.

The Part 50 program provides the Mine Safety and Health Administration the authority to investigate accidents, injuries and illnesses occurring in U.S. mines. Operators of coal, metal and nonmetal mines are required to notify the agency of occupational accidents, injury and illness of their employees. However, underreporting is a common occurrence.

Researchers led by Dr. Robert Cohen, clinical professor of environmental and occupational health sciences in the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health, looked at Part 50 reports of illness and injury in Illinois from 2001 to 2013, and attempted to link each report to a corresponding Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission case. Workers' [compensation](#) cases that didn't have a corresponding Part 50 report were considered unreported to the Part 50 program.

The researchers identified 1,923 cases of injury or illness in the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission reports from 2001 to 2013 that were captured by the Part 50 program. These cases represented just 34 percent of the 5,653 cases of injuries and illnesses to mining employees identified by the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission database. They found that the Part 50 program did not capture about 66 percent of Illinois workers' compensation cases among mining employees from 2001-2013.

"Underreporting to the Part 50 program really hinders the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration's ability to enforce [safety](#) and health standards," Cohen said.

Chronic injuries and illnesses were less likely to be reported to the Part 50 program than acute events, like accidents. "Ninety-four percent of chronic conditions, like pneumoconiosis, weren't captured by the Part 50 program," said Kirsten Almborg, research assistant professor of environmental and occupational health sciences in the UIC School of Public Health and a co-author on the paper.

Mine size was also correlated with reporting. The lowest rates of [injury](#) and illness reporting were associated with employees working in the smallest mines. "The underreporting by small mines may be due to lack of resources or established workplace safety programs," Cohen said.

"Employees may not report their occupational injuries or illnesses to their employer or file a workers' compensation claim out of fear of losing their job, or because they are unfamiliar with the system," said Almborg. "Programs that educate both mining operators and employees about the Part 50 [program](#) and workers' compensation, and policies designed to protect reporting workers from being punished or even fired, would help improve reporting rates, but more importantly, improve safety for those working in mines."

More information: Kirsten S. Almberg et al, Mine safety and health administration's part 50 program does not fully capture chronic disease and injury in the Illinois mining industry, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/ajim.22826](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.22826)

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