

Are Unionized Construction Companies Safer for Workers?



Unions are often in the forefront of calls for improvements in workplace safety. For example, unions have demanded that prosecutors pursue more criminal negligence charges for serious safety incidents, especially against members of senior management. But are unionized workplaces any safer than those without unions?

A recent study from the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) examined that question, considering whether unionized construction companies experience fewer workplace injuries than non-unionized ones. The study, entitled 'Protecting construction worker health and safety in Ontario Canada: Identifying a union safety effect,' was funded by the Ontario Construction Secretariat.

The researchers used claims data from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. They analyzed seven years of injury claims data (2006 to 2012 inclusive) for 5,800 unionized firms employing 720,000 full-time-equivalent (FTE) workers and 39,000 non-unionized firms employing 810,000 FTEs.

They found that workers at unionized construction workplaces in Ontario are more likely than their non-unionized counterparts to file job-related injury claims, but less likely to file injury claims that result in time off work.

More specifically, unionized companies in the province's industrial, commercial and institutional sector, compared to

their non-unionized counterparts and when taking firm size into account, have:

- 13% higher rates of total injury claims (both allowed and not allowed);
- 28% higher rates of allowed no-lost-time injury claims (that is, claims that require healthcare but don't result in time off work beyond the day of injury);
- 14% lower rates of allowed lost-time claims (that is, claims that involve missed days of work); and
- 8% lower rates of musculoskeletal injuries.

When not adjusted for firm size, the results show unionized firms have:

- 13% higher rates of total injury claims;
- 35% higher rates of no-lost-time claims;
- 23% lower rates of lost-time claims; and
- 17% lower rates of musculoskeletal injuries.

Note that adjusting for firm size takes into account that larger firms'both unionized and non-unionized'may have greater resources to devote to injury prevention and post-injury work accommodation.

'These findings suggest to us that unionized workers may be more likely to report injuries, including injuries that don't require time off work, at workplaces where managers and supervisors are committed to safety,' says IWH Senior Scientist Dr. Ben Amick, co-lead investigator on the study.

Although unionized workers may be more inclined to make work-related injury claims, these findings suggest that their claims are less likely to be of a serious nature, he adds.

'The lower rates of lost-time claims might also suggest that unionized workplaces are safer,' says IWH Associate Scientific Director Dr. Sheilah Hogg-Johnson and project co-lead. 'It could be they do a better job educating workers, in part

through apprenticeship training. They may have more effective health and safety programs and practices. They may give workers more voice to influence the health and safety of their work environments, and to report not only injuries, but also near-misses.'

But other factors must be ruled out before one can say with confidence that unionized construction firms are safer, Amick notes. One potentially confounding factor may be that unionized workers are older and more experienced at working safely. Another may be that unionized workplaces are better at offering employees modified work the day after an injury.

'Our research doesn't allow us to say what explains the difference in claim rates between the unionized and non-unionized firms,' says Hogg-Johnson. To help dig deeper, the IWH team is currently studying the organizational practices and policies of a sample of construction firms to examine what is behind the apparent union-safety effect.