

Recycling May Be Good for the Planet But Unsafe for Workers



Recycling paper products, cans, bottles, etc. is probably one of the most common environmental initiatives. But although recycling may be good for the planet, the work involved in processing recyclable materials may put workers at risk.

A new study released on June 23 found that recycling work is unnecessarily hazardous to workers' health and safety. In fact, in the US, recycling workers are more than twice as likely to be injured at work as the average worker. For example, on June 15, 2015, a Florida man was crushed to death in a cardboard compactor while working at a recycling plant in Winter Garden, FL.

Recycling workers in Canada may be at higher risk, too.

For example, a worker was sorting recyclables at a solid waste facility when he had trouble breathing, felt dizzy and nauseated, and had a mild headache. At the hospital, the doctors diagnosed him with carbon monoxide poisoning. The Appeals Tribunal upheld his workers' comp claim [[20147284 \(Re\)](#), [2014] CanLII 36505 (NB WHSCC), June 19, 2014].

And in Manitoba, a bale of recycled paper fell on a worker while he was unloading a trailer, killing him. His employer pleaded guilty to failing to provide its workers necessary information, instruction or training on the hazards of unloading bales of paper from trailers and was fined \$72,050 [*Western Scrap Metals Inc.*, Govt. News Release, Dec. 11,

2012].

The study, [Safe & Sustainable Recycling: Protecting Workers who Protect the Planet](#), was conducted by environmental, occupational safety and community benefits experts in collaboration with researchers at the University of Illinois School of Public Health. Its key findings include:

- The industry's high injury and fatality rates are a result of unsafe working conditions around heavy machinery and exposure to hazardous items on the sort line, such as hypodermic needles, toxic chemicals and animal carcasses.
- Many waste and recycling companies rely heavily on [temporary workers](#), who have fewer workplace protections and are less likely to be informed of their legal right to a safe and healthy workplace.

According to the study, the top nine safety hazards that recycling workers face:

1. Risk of being struck by vehicles, or falling bales or materials
2. Working with moving machinery, such as conveyors
3. Exposure to dangerous materials
4. Working in [awkward postures](#)
5. Dealing with extreme temperatures and [fatigue](#)
6. [Respiratory hazards](#), such as dust
7. Exposure to [noise](#) and vibration
8. [Slips, trips and falls](#)
9. Occupational [stress](#).

To create safe recycling jobs, the study's authors recommend:

- Governments evaluate the health and safety records of recycling companies and require them to have comprehensive worker safety programs.

- The recycling industry ends the use of temporary workers.
- Cities enact strong community education programs for greater household separation of waste to minimize the risk of dangerous contaminants entering the recycling stream.