Report Criticizes Media Coverage of Workplace Injuries & Fatalities in Alberta



When a worker is injured or killed on the job, the media may'or may not'cover the incident. Does media coverage of safety incidents create an accurate picture of workplace safety and related issues'

According to a new report by two professors at Athabasca University, the answer, at least in Alberta, is no.

The researchers argue that newspaper articles are key sources of information about workplace injuries and fatalities. The impressions gleaned from these articles shape how Alberta workers, the general public and policymakers view workplace injury and safety.

But they claim that research on Alberta newspaper articles published between 2009-2014 suggests such newspaper articles create a misleading picture of workplace injuries and fatalities.

Key criticisms include:

- Women's experiences of workplace injury are almost entirely ignored, which reflects the over-reporting of injuries to men and injuries to workers in blue-collar

occupations.

- The vast majority of workplace injuries are never reported. Instead, reporters focus almost exclusively on (relatively rare) occupational fatalities.
- Reporters rely heavily on government and employer sources in the stories. Workers and their advocates are rarely quoted about an incident or its causes.
- Reporters use three basic story templates that frame workplace injuries as under investigation, before the courts or human tragedies.
- Together, these three media frames create a meta-narrative wherein injuries are isolated events that happen to 'others,' and for which no one is responsible (except maybe the worker). This approach, in turn, suggests that the public need not be concerned about workplace safety.

This inaccurate picture of workplace safety may skew public perceptions and result in potentially under-estimating of the risk of workplace injury, which, in turn, is likely to dampen demand for effective OHS enforcement.

The researchers argue that if more accurate information was provided to Albertans about the extent of workplace injury and death, more of them might be moved to pressure the government to intensify enforcement. Albertans may also directly pressure employers who don't meet their OHS obligations to create a safe workplace, such as by choosing not to purchase the products and services offered by unsafe employers. And workers might seek employment elsewhere.

The report concludes that the combination of the government's inadequate communication about injuries and newspapers' incomplete coverage creates a situation where Albertans are in the dark about the full extent of workplace injuries and fatalities in the province. In this information vacuum, the issue of Alberta's profoundly unsafe workplaces is obscured and public pressure isn't brought to bear on government and

employers to make workplaces safer. The ultimate consequence is that workers continue to be needlessly injured and killed on the job.

The report includes 10 recommendations for improving the amount and quality of information available to Albertans about workplace injuries and fatalities. These suggestions are directed at Alberta Labour and/or the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board and include:

- Providing regular updates to the public of all OHS investigations being conducted in the province, including the status and outcome of the investigation, and identification of the causal chain of the incident to demonstrate that the incidents are not 'accidents.'
- Providing quarterly reports outlining key information about workplace inspections conducted in the province, such as origin of inspection (i.e., complaint, targeted), industry, violations identified, orders and tickets issued, and whether the violation was remedied.
- Revamping the employer OHS record online database to make it more user-friendly and to provide more information regarding all WCB claims, violations and prosecutions.
- Publishing an annual list of 'worst performing' employers according to a series of OHS benchmarks, such as total claim rate, OHS violations, complaints.
- Including demographic and occupational data and more detailed injury information in annual statistics to more clearly highlight the types of injury different workers.

Do you agree with the researchers observation and conclusions' Do you think the media in your province or territory does a good job covering workplace injuries and fatalities' What could the media be doing better' Share your thoughts in the comments below.