

# Caution Teens AT Work

Mary E. Miller

**M**allory, a 14-year-old girl, was visiting a friend who was working in her father's ice manufacturing plant. To earn money for church camp, Mallory was helping her friend bag ice.

When one of the bags became overfilled, Mallory took the bag of ice to the hopper-end of the machine, where the auger was located, in order to dump the excess ice into the unguarded hopper. The bag became caught in the auger, pulling her by both arms into the machine. It took 55 minutes to get her released. Mallory has required multiple surgeries and much rehabilitation. She will never have full use of her arms again. Since she was paid below minimum wage as a 14-year-old, her total disability payment was only \$90,000.

Young workers are exposed to many of the same occupational risks as their adult counterparts, but for various reasons, they are more likely to be injured than are adult workers. Recently, construction-related jobs have been identified as having high injury and fatality rates for this age-group, with up to 84 percent of youth in these jobs performing prohibited activities. Agriculture is also another high-hazard industry for youth, as it is for adults. Aggregate data across industries indicate that teens are injured at a rate at least two times higher than adults. Nearly 70 youths under the age of 18 die each year in the US as a result of an occupational injury. The leading causes of death are motor vehicles, agricultural machinery, and homicide. Nationally it is estimated that approximately 230,000 teens suffer work-related injuries each year, with 77,000, or one-third, of these seeking care in emergency rooms.

## Characteristics of youth workers

Youth are new to the world of work and their age and inexperience contribute to their increased risk for injury. During this time in their lives, they are going through a great deal of change, learning many new things, and facing difficult challenges. Their ability to focus is sometimes compromised. Compared to adults, adolescents have less developed cognitive abilities, physical



Washington Department of Labor and Industries

coordination, and overall maturity, and they are experiencing a rapidly changing physiology. They often have a limited perception of danger and lack of a sense of vulnerability, which may lead them to engage in risk-taking behaviors. In addition, because of their youth and lack of work experience, they may feel unable to speak up to an adult or a person in authority about concerns or fears they may have when placed in a dangerous situation. At this time of their life, they seek to be given increased responsibilities and do not want to appear not to know what they are doing, which makes them even less inclined to ask questions.

## Youth in Washington State

Data about injured teens in Washington State are available from workers' compensation claims, administered by the Department of Labor and Industries (L&I). Washington State is unique as the only state labor department with three major divisions affecting the workplace—industrial insurance, or workers' compensation; health and safety; and the wage, hour, and child labor regulations. This provides a great opportunity to identify injuries among teens, pursue coordinated enforcement activities as appropriate, and provide outreach and education for prevention.

In the early 1990s more than 4,000 young workers received workers' compensation benefits in Washington State annually. The numbers of workers' compensation claims are thought to be an underestimate of actual injuries, however, because many teens, parents, and health care providers

are not aware that a workers' compensation claim can be filed for an injured teen just as for any other worker. The most common types of injuries include slips and falls, strains and sprains, burns, and lacerations. More severe injuries include fractures, concussions, dislocations, amputations, and multiple injuries.

From 1995 to 2005, the average number of injuries among teens decreased to 2,225 with a range of 1,200 to 2,900 per year. This drop is likely due to a combination of strategies, including changes in the regulations, effective enforcement, and outreach and education to teens, parents, employers, and teachers.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, the difference in the injury rate for boys and girls has narrowed. However, boys continue to be injured at work nearly 30 percent more often than girls. The reasons for this have not been explored. Some anecdotal evidence indicates that they may work in more dangerous jobs or take more chances. Another possibility is that developmentally boys tend to be less mature and potentially less coordinated than girls of the same age. Consistent with employment patterns, about 95 percent of injuries occur among 16- and 17-year-olds. From 1988 to the present, there have been 15 fatalities; all but one were males. Four died from agricultural or construction machinery, three from highway vehicles, three from being struck by falling objects, two from suffocation in a grain silo, one from a fall from a roof, one from drowning, and one from a fatal stabbing at a quick-service restaurant.

In Washington State, the percentage of time loss claims for teens is similar to adults', indicating that they have missed at least three days of work. Since they may not work full-time and typically are not scheduled on consecutive days, however, such lost time may indicate more severe injuries or at least injuries that could interfere with school and other age-appropriate activities. A number of injuries and

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## Workplace Safety Strategies for Youth

### For Parents, Caregivers, and Teens

- All employers are required to have a Minor Work Permit to hire minors and a permission slip, known as a Parent/School Authorization Form, signed by the parent. The form must also be signed by the school when it is in session. Parents should be aware that they need to sign this form giving permission for their teen to work and to be sure that the employer is aware of the laws protecting them.
- Parents and teens should be aware that there are restrictions for hazardous work for minors and restricted work hours. This information is available at [TeenWorkers.LNI.wa.gov](http://TeenWorkers.LNI.wa.gov).
- Parents and teens should be aware that the minimum age for minors to work is 14. The number of hours per week and starting and quitting times and work activities are more limited for 14- and 15-year-olds. The hours of work also differ for all minors while school is in session.
- Teens should know their rights, which include the right to a safe and healthy workplace and the right to refuse to do dangerous work. Teens should know what work activities they are not permitted to perform. They should know that they can decline to do a task that they have not been trained to do. They should be encouraged to ask the following questions in any job:
  - What are the hazards and dangers of my job?
  - What are my health and safety responsibilities?
  - Will I receive job safety training and information on any safety gear I'll need to wear?
  - Who do I ask if I have a health and safety question?
  - What do I do if I get hurt?

### For Employers

- Follow all child labor and relevant health and safety regulations.
- Provide increased supervision to new workers; if possible, teens should not work alone.
- Consider a young worker's physical capacity to perform the job safely, maturity to exercise good judgment, and ability to read and understand written instructions and safety signs.
- Involve co-workers; create a mentoring program among experienced workers, including experienced teen workers.
- Encourage young workers to ask questions and ask for assistance.
- Provide more detailed training for those new to the world of work including:
  - New employee orientation.
  - Specific task training.
  - Age-appropriate training—make it fun and easy to understand; keep instructions direct, short, and simple (include only information that will be needed immediately).
- Frequently review and retrain (repetition, repetition, repetition).

### For Schools and Communities

- Encourage high schools and job training and placement programs to integrate curricula about workplace safety and teens' on-the-job rights.
- Develop community coalitions comprised of business associations, labor groups, schools, job placement and training programs, youth-advocacy groups, teen organizations, government agencies, health care providers, and family members.
- Encourage community coalitions to provide information to employers on the regulations for hiring minors, including the need to have a minor work endorsement or permit, the importance of providing training when a young worker is new to a job, and the need to provide periodic retraining and ongoing supervision.
- Conduct an assessment of the community to determine the extent and nature of local teen employment and workplace injury. Based on the composition of the types of industries in the community, target outreach measures based on the potential job activities and hazards teens are likely to encounter.
- Provide training and educational resources to members of the community so all are informed about the major issues concerning young workers.
- Assess teen attitudes toward work and workplace safety and health issues through the use of surveys or focus groups, and promote peer education programs to address workplace safety and health issues.

fatalities occur in jobs prohibited to youth, but the vast majority take place in jobs currently allowable under federal and state child labor regulations. The federal and state regulations have not kept pace with the changes in the workplace, such as new machinery and equipment, biologic agents, and hazardous substances.

### **Increasing workplace safety awareness**

Research into occupational injuries among minors began to increase during the late 1980s, bringing more attention to the need for improved prevention. A 1995 report by the Department of Labor and Industries was one of the first in the United States to identify the higher rate of injuries among young workers. As a result, Washington State began to work with employers, other state agencies, and schools to develop more outreach and education about health and safety needs for young workers. At the same time, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health began to focus part of its research agenda on the needs of young workers, both to provide descriptive data regarding the injury patterns and to identify and evaluate preventive strategies.

A 1998 Institute of Medicine report, *Protecting Youth at Work*, brought together much of the available research data and highlighted the need to increase public health measures to protect working teens. In recent years, OSHA and the Wage and Hour Division at the US Department of Labor have also expanded their focus to include development of educational materials for injury prevention among youth.

As part of Washington's initiative to increase available resources for health and safety awareness, L&I's Medical Aid Fund provided funding to develop the School-to-Work outreach program at the University of Washington Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences. The curriculum, Health and Safety Awareness for Working Teens, contains four interactive, one-hour modules covering the areas of health and safety hazards, strategies to reduce hazards in the workplace, child labor laws, and strategies to work with employers to resolve problems. A 13-minute video

has recently been developed as part of the curriculum. In addition to the general curriculum, an agriculture-specific curriculum has been developed. An interactive Web-based training module for woodshops is also available. (See the curriculum and other program resources at [www.uvworksafe.com/worksafe](http://www.uvworksafe.com/worksafe).)

Health professionals must be alert to the needs of young people and recognize that for some youth work is a significant part of their lives and their risk for injury may be substantial. Health care providers should take a thorough work history from their young patients if seen in a school or clinical setting during routine visits. This includes asking about their work activities, hours of work, types of exposures, use of personal protective equipment, and availability of safety training. Studies have found that more than half of injured teens do not receive training in how to prevent injuries while doing their jobs. Somatic health complaints such as headache, fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbances, anxiety, and depression should be assessed as possibly related to teens' attempt to do more than they can handle. Injuries must be evaluated for a possible work-related cause and workers' compensation claims should be filed where appropriate.

Schools can also participate in providing health and safety curriculum materials to teachers and counselors to inform students about their rights on the job, the dangers they may encounter, and strategies to protect themselves. Teachers and counselors should also be aware of the child labor regulations on hours of work and jobs that teens can legally perform. (Find the regulations through the US Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division or the appropriate state labor department.)

Special protections for youth have been recognized by the United Nations and the International Labor Organization, beginning in the 1920s, through the publication of various declarations and conventions on the rights of the child. Policy makers, health and safety professionals, employers, and the public have the responsibility to act on youths' behalf. Injury prevention requires the combined efforts of enforcement and compliance measures, plus education and outreach strategies. Young workers are our future adult workforce, and a solid foundation for their protection must continue. As Oliver Tambo, president of the African National Congress in 1985, said, "The children of any nation are its future. A country, a movement, a person that does not value its youth and children does not deserve its future." ■

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## **Resources on youth work safety and hiring minors**

Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences. School to Work Program. *Teen Workers: Real Jobs, Real Risks* (DVD or VHS, 13 minutes); *Health and Safety Awareness for Working Teens* (curriculum). University of Washington. [www.uvworksafe.com/worksafe](http://www.uvworksafe.com/worksafe). 2005.

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