

REFLECTING REALITY



A more accurate picture of Ontario worker injury, illness and death

Claims allowed by Ontario’s Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB) have become the default statistics shared by many when discussing the number of workers killed, injured, or made ill each year by hazardous work. Though experiences of workers, their families and a growing body of research evidence make it clear WSIB statistics fail to reflect the reality workers confront. Most worker deaths and many injuries and illnesses caused by unsafe and unhealthy working conditions are never reported to, or recognized by, the WSIB and why their statistics are an entirely inaccurate picture of the real cost workers pay. This is particularly the case for cancer and other occupational illnesses with long latency periods between workplace exposures and disease onset.

And what will be the experience we take away from the COVID-19 crisis? Will we get a truer reflection of workplace transmission, infections, deaths and related mental injury? Will affected workers be properly compensated? **To date, approximately 22,000 COVID-related lost-time claims for Ontario workers employed in all sectors have been recognized by the WSIB (current as of April 26, 2021). Included in this total are just 46 claims allowed for COVID-related worker deaths.**

We need a more accurate picture. This awareness may lend urgency to actions needed in pursuit of prevention. What form action takes is just as important. To be effective, prevention efforts must be guided by the precautionary principle and hierarchy of hazard controls.

2,870
Estimated number of Ontario workers killed in 2019 by all work hazards.¹



400,000
Estimated number of Ontario workers injured or made ill in 2019 by all work hazards.²



1 In their **2018 study**, University of Ottawa researchers suggest a more accurate picture of worker deaths would number between 9,800 and 13,200 Canadians — or 10 to 13 times higher than fatalities reported by Canadian compensation boards. So, for Ontario in 2019, using the lower percentage this would translate into 2,870 worker deaths. Although, whether one multiplies by 10 or 13, the report concludes, both are conservative estimates. Other research has long supported this truth. For instance, Dr. Annalee Yassi estimated 6,000 work-related deaths annually in Ontario from cancer, cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases alone (all source — *Occupational Disease and Worker Compensation in Ontario*, 1983). Studies also suggest between **five** and **16 per cent** of cancers are work-related. Based on these percentages and data provided by the **Canadian Cancer Society** between 1,505 and 4,816 Ontarians died in 2020 from work-related cancer.

2 Estimates of underreporting of occupational injuries and illness to compensation systems throughout North America range from 20 to **70 per cent**. The lower estimate was suggested by Ontario’s WSIB in a 2013 report. University of Washington researchers **published evidence** in 2019 suggesting even the most conservative estimates indicate half of work-related injuries and illnesses are not accurately reported to the appropriate regulatory authority. More recently in 2020, Ontario’s Institute of Work and Health **published study results** finding 64 per cent of injuries go unreported to a workers’ compensation board.

3 By the Numbers: **2019 WSIB Statistical Report** (data current as of March 25, 2021).