Exposure to risk

European and some national sources suggest that young workers are more exposed to the following physical work factors — noise, vibrations, heat and cold, and the handling of dangerous substances.

Young people working in hotels and restaurants and construction are especially exposed to loud noise. Young workers are also particularly susceptible to acoustic shock injuries because they form a large part of the call centre workforce.

Health outcomes

Non-fatal accidents

National and European data suggest that young workers are at greater risk of having an occupational accident. Nevertheless, accident rates and causes of accidents vary greatly between different sectors and occupations. According to the latest European data (5), the incidence rate of non-fatal accidents at work was more than 40% higher among those aged 18–24. Young men especially appear to be a risk group for safety at work.

Fatal accidents

According to EU figures, young workers have lower overall fatal accident rates. These results are in line with evidence from all over the world. Nevertheless, fatal accident rates of young workers can be considerable in some sectors. Agriculture has the highest incidence, followed by construction, transport and communication, and manufacturing. Construction is the sector with the highest number of young worker

Exposure to heat is common in outdoor occupations (agriculture or construction), industry, and hotels and restaurants.

Dangerous substances appear in various occupational settings where young workers are employed: they include agricultural and construction chemicals, cleaning products, petrol, solvents and hairdressing products.

According to survey results from EU and national sources, physically demanding work factors (such as working in awkward positions, handling heavy loads, and repetitive work) seem to be more common among young workers than in the average workforce. As a result, young workers are at considerable risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders (including low back pain). Surveys also suggest that young workers seem to be less informed about occupational risks.

As the pace of life and work continues to increase in today’s world, young people are increasingly having to work to tight deadlines and at very high speed. And even though surveys suggest that they work fewer hours than the average working population, young people do more shift work and have more irregular working hours.

Young workers are also more likely to report being the subject of unwanted sexual attention. Young women with precarious jobs in the hotel and service industry are many times more likely to be exposed to sexual harassment.

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Reference:

4. European Statistics for Accidents at Work (ESAW).
5. Agriculture; Manufacturing; Electricity, gas and water supply; Construction; Wholesale and retail, repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and personal and household goods; Hotels and restaurants; Transport, storage and communication; Financial intermediation; Real estate, renting and business activities.

http://osha.europa.eu
Prevention and research needs

Some recommendations for research and practice:
- target sectors where young workers are most at risk;
- target the most prevalent risks for awareness raising among employers and the young workers themselves;
- target employment agencies to raise awareness about the risks to which young workers are exposed;
- train inspectors about where most young workers are employed and which risks they face;
- take account of the specific needs of specific groups of young workers (male/female, migrant, etc.);
- pay special attention to part-timers and temporary workers. Advice should mention the importance of special attention to young workers and specific guidance should be given to employers, inspectors and preventive services;
- include young workers’ issues in guidelines on shiftworking;
- refocus rehabilitation and employability policies for injured workers to include young workers;
- include OSH in education. This is particularly important for those entering precarious jobs, who receive less training at work and are hard to reach.

More information

The report also contributes to the Agency’s annual campaign, which in 2006 was dedicated to the protection of young people at work. Under the slogan ‘Safe start’, over 30 countries participate actively in Europe’s largest OSH campaign to protect young workers.

Information on employment and the main sectors employing young workers is summarised in Facts 69: Young workers — Facts and Figures: Youth employment.

Further information on young worker safety is available at: http://ew2006.osha.europa.eu/