



Policy Can Improve Occupational Health and Safety

A Systematic Literature Review of the Effectiveness of Occupational Health and Safety Regulatory Enforcement

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Emile Tompa, C. Kalcevich, M. Foley, C. McLeod, S. Hogg-Johnson, K. Cullen, E. MacEachen, Q. Mahood, and E. Irvin

Overview

The purpose of this review was to determine the strength of evidence for the effectiveness of occupational health and safety (OHS) legislative and regulatory policy “levers”. These levers refer to the specific means by which regulators encourage employer actions to improve OHS processes and outcomes.

A systematic review was undertaken using a “best-evidence” synthesis approach. Methods for the identification, quality assessment, and literature analysis are detailed.

Out of 11,947 citations from peer-reviewed sources that were initially identified, 43 were retained for final review. The effect of nine separate policy levers was evaluated. Examples of these include: the introduction of new OHS legislation, general and specific deterrence of inspections and penalties, inspection sequence, consultative activities, and awareness campaigns.

Key Findings

There is a substantial body of evidence that legislative and regulatory policy levers are effective at improving OHS outcomes.

Strong evidence of effect was found for the following:

- Inspections with penalties result in a decrease in injuries at the inspected establishment.
- Consultative activity has no effect on injury outcomes, with some exceptions.
- Smoke-free workplace legislation reduces second-hand exposure

Moderate evidence of effect was found for the following:

- Inspections *without* penalties do not impact injuries except in particular contexts, such as fixed-site industries or inspections initiated by a worker.
- A first inspection has the largest impact on compliance rates.
- The introduction of OHS legislation has an effect on final outcomes
- Smoke-free workplace legislation improves health outcomes.
- Awareness campaigns improve compliance.

Impact

This study adds substantially to the evidence that legislative and regulatory policy can improve occupational health and safety outcomes. The evidence can inform OHS policy decision making, and provides insight into areas warranting further exploration and research.

Contact the SHARP author:

Michael.Foley@Lni.wa.gov

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