



How Unions Help Prevent Workplace Deaths in the United States

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Between 1992 and 2016, about 138,000 workers in the United States died in on-the-job accidents, an important if overlooked topic in public health. Worryingly, the number of workplace deaths has risen in recent years, reversing earlier trends toward fewer deaths.

In 2016, 5,190 US workers died on the job, marking the third consecutive year of increasing occupational mortality, and reaching the highest number of workplace fatalities since 2008. This reversal has coincided with the uptick in adoption of anti-union legislation, such as so-called “right-to-work” laws that prohibit labor unions from charging fees to members of the collective bargaining units they represent. If workers who benefit from union-bargained improvements do not join and pay dues, union finances suffer and so do their abilities to perform key functions.

Right to work laws have recently proliferated across the United States. Since 2000, seven states – Oklahoma (2001), Michigan (2012), Indiana (2012), Wisconsin (2015), West Virginia (2016), Kentucky (2017) and Missouri (2017) have implemented this legislation. The U.S. South, a region with high rates of workplace fatalities, has had such laws for decades, and now twenty-eight states have right to work rules. Overall, the accelerated passage of right to work laws has exacerbated U.S. union decline, a trend sure to be furthered by the recent Supreme Court decision in *Janus vs American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees* to ban membership fees for all government employee unions.

So what? Negative effect of union losses on wages and benefits are well established. But unions also organize and work to improve safety and health. My research explores how union declines – and right to work laws in particular – shape rates of workplace mortality at the state level.

How Unions Promote Workplace Safety

Scholars have identified several ways that unions promote workplace safety.

- Unions make complaints to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the federal agency charged with enforcing workplace safety regulations and investigating and fining companies for violations. Unionized workplaces are more likely to be inspected; and the threat of unionization may prod employers to improve workplace safety.
- Unionized workplaces tend to have better health insurance, which could improve the overall health of workers and reduce employee stress about medical expenses.
- Union collective bargaining agreements frequently contain language that restricts excessive shifts and requires safety equipment like gloves, goggles, and helmets.

Union Density and Variations in Workplace Deaths Across States

My research tracks changes in unionization rates and rates of workplace fatalities across the 50 U.S. states over the 25-year period from 1992 to 2016, the years for which the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries has been conducted. After controlling for other variables, the statistical model finds that unions have a protective effect on workplace fatalities across the states. Specifically, a one-percentage point increase in the unionized workforce was associated with a 2.8% decline in the rate of occupational fatalities.

By weakening unions, right to work legislation has been associated with about a 14% increase in the rate of occupational fatalities. These results held even when I took into account the industry patterns in states and included an overall index of policy liberalism that can account for variations in state openness to regulation.

Though workplace fatalities have declined overall in the United States, the declines were greater in states with more robust unions.

Anti-Union Legislation Jeopardizes Workplace Safety

The implications of my study are stark. In Wisconsin, for example, from 2000 to 2016 the percentage of the workforce that was part of a union declined from about 18% to about 8%. According to the statistical model, a change of this magnitude corresponds to an increase in the predicted rate of workplace fatalities from about 3.5 to about 5 deaths per 100,000 workers.

The decline of unionization – stemming, in part, from anti-union policies like “right-to-work” legislation as adopted by Wisconsin – may undermine workplace safety at the cost of human lives and limbs. As scholars have pinpointed in detail, unions make the workplace safer, and my new study suggests that falling unionization rates are associated with higher rates of death on the job. Union organizers, social reformers, and lawmakers alike would do well to consider how laws that hinder unionization might have harmful consequences for safety on the job.

Read more in Michael Zoorob, “Does ‘Right to Work’ Imperil the Right to Health? The Effect of Labour Unions on Workplace Fatalities” *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 75, no. 10 (2018): 736-738