



# Briefing Note

Commission for Labor Cooperation

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## WORKPLACE INJURIES AND ILLNESSES IN NORTH AMERICA

Given the number of work injuries and illnesses in North America, as well as their associated costs, there is a constant need for statistics on occupational health and safety. The general downward trend observed in the number of serious injuries and illnesses in the region, coupled with the development of improved prevention programs, is also giving support to the statistical monitoring of such programs. However, the statistics are not as representative as they could be, and this fact must be taken into consideration in any examination of available data. In addition, the methodological issues concerning representativeness are compounded by problems of comparability between data from the three North American countries. This briefing note provides an overview of statistics on workplace injuries and illnesses in North America for the period 1993–2002. However, its primary objective is to discuss the particular features of the data available from each of the three countries, in order to help the reader interpret this information. The note begins with a discussion of the methodological differences observed.

### Canada

In Canada, applications for compensation for workplace injuries and illnesses are handled by one of the 12 provincial and territorial workers' compensation boards.<sup>1</sup> These boards function independently of one another and are governed by different

laws and regulations. Although they share a significant number of characteristics, the different legislative frameworks make for significant regional variations. It is important to take these differences into account, because Canadian workplace injury and illness statistics are based on data from the provincial and territorial boards. The Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada (AWCBC) is responsible for managing the National Work Injuries Statistics Program and for making the statistical adjustments required to produce nationwide figures.

In addition to the difficulties in making interjurisdictional comparisons,<sup>2</sup> using the administrative files from the 12 workers' compensation boards involves problems of representativeness. First, although most Canadian employers are required to belong to a workers' compensation program, it is estimated that only 80% of the work force is actually enrolled; each province has a specific list of occupations or industries that may be excluded from compulsory coverage (e.g., the financial and agricultural sectors, the liberal professions, and domestic services). Second, the administration of the compensation programs also leads to a lack of representativeness because the only statistics considered in the National Statistics Program are those relating to compensation requests officially filed—by workers, employers, and health care practitioners—and accepted by the provincial and territorial boards. Thus some injuries, illnesses, and fatalities are excluded from the national statistics. Third, as is the case in Mexico, the National Statistics Program excludes injuries and illnesses that do not result in time off work, except for some work-related illnesses that generally do not result in time off work (e.g., loss of hearing).

This note was prepared by Martin Dumas, a researcher with the Secretariat of the Commission for Labor Cooperation. He can be contacted at [mdumas@naalc.org](mailto:mdumas@naalc.org) or (202) 464-1100.

## United States

In the United States, statistics on work-related injuries, illnesses, and fatalities come from two main sources: the national *Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries*, which is based on checking and cross-checking of a variety of other sources of information (death certificates, workers' compensation files, reports to federal government agencies, etc.); and the *Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses*, which was based on a sample of about 182,800 private-sector establishments in 2002. This latter survey also has some limitations for it excludes self-employed workers, farms employing fewer than 11 workers, domestic services, and federal government agencies themselves. Data from state and municipal agencies are also excluded from the processing of national statistics. The estimates are based on an analysis of employers' reports. The employers are asked, among other things, to differentiate between injuries that should be recorded for reporting purposes and those that should not be under Department of Labor directives. The survey is nonetheless fairly reliable. In 2001, the incidence rate for work-related injuries and illnesses (5.7 per 100 full-time private-sector workers) had a relative standard deviation of approximately 0.8%.<sup>3</sup>

## Mexico

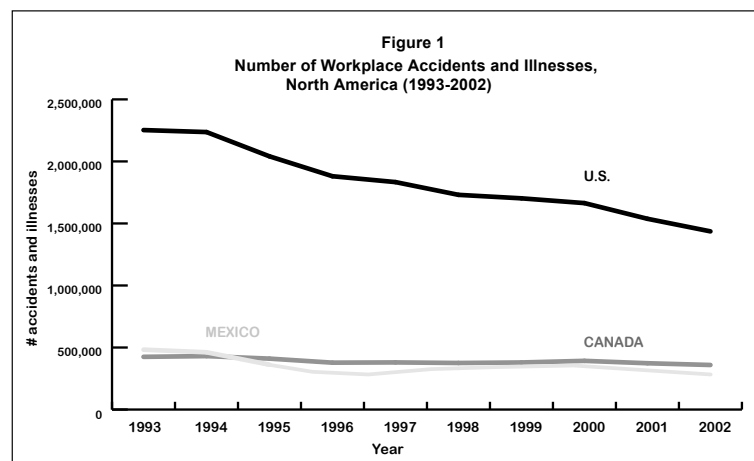
As in the case of Canada, Mexican data on work-related injuries and illnesses are collected from administrative sources and are not the subject of sampling. Injured workers must submit a report to their employer, who then notify one of the institutes responsible for administering the compensation plan<sup>4</sup>—the Mexican Institute for Social Security (Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social), the Institute for Social Security and Social Services for Government Workers (Instituto de Seguridad Social y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado), or the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, STPS). STPS is also responsible for compiling and publishing statistics on work-related injuries and illnesses every month. While all sectors of economic activity are included in the statistics program,

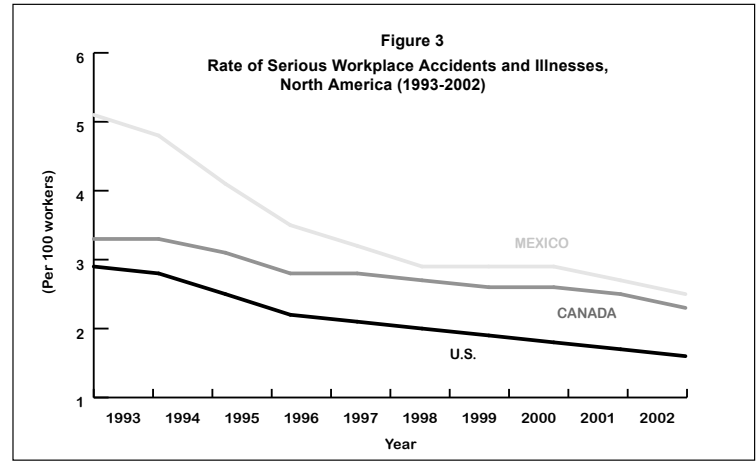
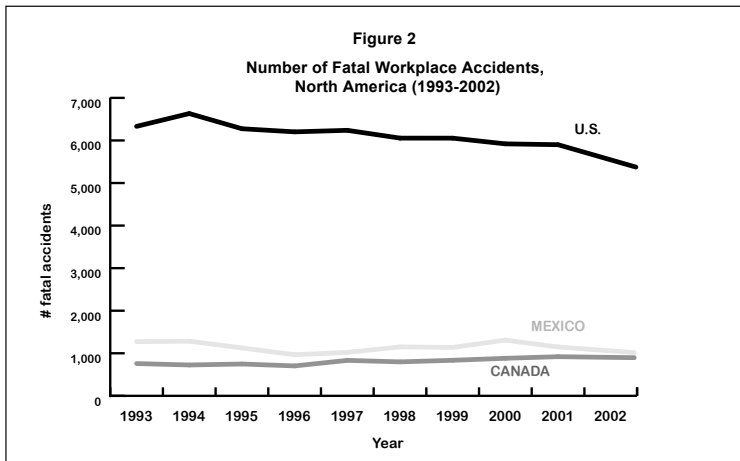
only those workers receiving social security benefits are included. Considering the significant percentage of workers in the informal economy in Mexico,<sup>5</sup> the number of workers officially exposed to risk in the workplace in 2002 was 12.4 million (STPS 2002). It should be noted that other institutions provide the Mexican labour force with alternative forms of social security, but official data are not compiled from them (ILO 1999).

## Recent trends

Although the labour force has been growing steadily in North America, the absolute number of serious work injuries and illnesses (i.e., involving days away from work) is either levelling off or dropping (see figure 1). In the United States, the number declined gradually from 2.3 million in 1993 to 1.4 million in 2002.<sup>6</sup> In Mexico, it ranged between 483,000 and 307,000 during the period 1993–2002.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Canada, the number of injuries and illnesses is currently hovering under the 380,000 mark, after having reached 430,756 in 1994.

The number of deaths resulting from work-related injuries and illnesses has trended slightly upwards in Canada since the mid-1990s, growing from 758 in 1993 to 920 in 2001 (see figure 2). In Mexico, it fluctuated between a low of 966 in 1996 and a high of 1309 in 2000. In the United States, on the other hand, the number has been slowly but steadily falling: it dropped from 6331 in 1993 to 5524 in 2002.





If we factor in the number of workers exposed to the risk of work-related injuries and illnesses, we see a downward trend in the incidence of workplace injuries and illnesses involving days away from work. Bearing in mind the methodological caveats pointed out earlier, there appears to be a downward trend in the three countries. In Mexico, the incidence rate (per 100 workers) declined from 5.1 to 2.5; in the U.S., it dropped from 2.9 to 1.6, whereas it declined from 3.3 to 2.3 in Canada (see figure 3). It should be noted that the Canadian data cannot be rigorously compared with the other data in this regard.<sup>8</sup> However, work is currently being done on generating more representative Canadian statistics on the incidence rate of work-related injuries (in Ontario, for example; see Smith et al 2003).

### Conclusion

It would seem that preventive efforts in North America to reduce the incidence rate of serious work-related injuries and illnesses are paying off, although the number of injuries, illnesses, and fatalities is still high and their causes persist. Ideally, the efforts being made should help to remove some of the impediments to generating data that would be more representative of North American workers' true state of health and safety. The importance attached by the North American countries to the development of more efficient prevention programs and the sharing of best practices at the trinational level is thus an essential step in that regard.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Companies falling under federal jurisdiction are governed by provincial legislation for workers' compensation, but not for inspection and prevention procedures.

<sup>2</sup> There are different requirements as to the content of a workplace injury report and in the reporting procedures. For example, the nature of the information to be provided (seriousness and types of injuries and illnesses) and reporting time limits vary from one jurisdiction to another.

<sup>3</sup> This means that the incidence rate (per 100 workers) lies between 5.61 and 5.79 at a confidence interval of 95% (i.e.,  $5.7 \pm (2 \times 0.8\%)$ ).

<sup>4</sup> Section 504 of the Federal Labor Law [Ley Federal del Trabajo] establishes the duties of the employer in this regard.

<sup>5</sup> In 1998, the rate was estimated to be 41.7% (STPS 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Due to recent methodological changes, the estimates from the 2002 survey are not strictly comparable with those from previous years (BLS 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the situation prevailing in Canada and the United States, injuries occurring while traveling directly to and from work are normally taken into account in the Mexican statistics (Federal Labor Law, [Ley Federal del Trabajo] section 474).

<sup>8</sup> The injury rates for Canada are obtained using the total labor force, as opposed to the insured labor force. This understates the actual injury rate in a significant way, since the proportion of workers not covered under the various provincial regimes revolves around 20%. Also, changes in Canadian legislation over rights to insurance coverage over time distort the longitudinal comparability of these ratios.

## Data Sources

For Canada, the data come from the report entitled *Work Injuries and Diseases*, published by the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada. For the United States, they come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses* and, with respect to fatalities, from its *Census of Fatal Occupational*

*Injuries*. For Mexico, the data come from the report entitled *Estadísticas de Accidentes y Enfermedades de Trabajo*, published by the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social. Methodological differences in the way data are defined and collected in the three countries are discussed in the text.

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