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Abstract

This special report has been compiled by The University of Adelaide and provides an overview of young worker injury claims experience for a 10-year period. It aims to highlight occupational injury epidemiology and time trends, and will be of interest to public health practitioners dealing with adolescents and young adults.

Keywords

experience, south, young, worker, injury, 1998-2007, australia

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Young worker injury experience in South Australia 1998–2007

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Preface

This special report has been compiled by The University of Adelaide and provides an overview of young worker injury claims experience for a 10-year period. It aims to highlight occupational injury epidemiology and time trends, and will be of interest to public health practitioners dealing with adolescents and young adults.

Summary

WorkCover SA injury claims by 15–24-year-old workers in the period 1998–2007 were combined with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census and workforce participation data to estimate injury rates. The information included minor injuries as well as serious injuries (i.e. those involving 1 week or more of lost work time).

The data show significant differences between males and females, as well as a steady temporal decline with respect to all injuries and a less obvious decline in serious injuries. The majority of injuries were associated with the fingers, hands and upper limbs.

The incidence of injury continues to be of concern, with an average of 1 in 15 young male workers making an injury claim each year.

Introduction

Injuries among young people represent a significant burden to society in terms of potential long-term costs and lost opportunity. Young workers are over-represented in workplace injury statistics, and this has been attributed to a range of factors such as lack of experience, incomplete physical and mental development, and risk-taking behaviours.¹ As part of the National OHS Strategy 2002–12, all Australian jurisdictions set a target of reducing workplace injuries by 40%, with a reduction of 20% to have been achieved by 30 June 2007.² With respect to young workers, interventions have included secondary school safety education initiatives, regulatory campaigns in the hospitality industry, and young worker websites. The purpose of this report is to characterise young worker injury claims experience in South Australia (SA) in the context of the national objectives.

Methods

The number of SA workers in the age range 15–24 years in the period 1998–2007 was estimated from ABS census data and workforce participation data.³ The age- and gender-specific working populations were interpolated when data for individual years were not available. Claims data were provided by WorkCover SA, and serious injuries, involving 1 week or more of lost time, were considered separately. Claims rates are expressed as the number of claims per worker, as there were no data on full- or part-time employment or the number of hours worked. There was no adjustment for multiple claims for the same individual in any one year, but, in general, such multiple claims represent a very small proportion of the total. Industry-specific data are expressed as absolute claims across the period 1998–2007. Claims by body location are presented from 2007 statistics, but other years are similar. In order to assess the experience of teen workers, young workers were stratified as 15–19-year-olds and 20–24-year-olds.

Findings

Serious injury claims

Rates of serious claims over the period 1998–2007 show a weak decline in both age strata (Figure 1), with a steeper decline during 2004–07. Rates in the 20–24 years age group are about twice those for the 15–19 years age group.

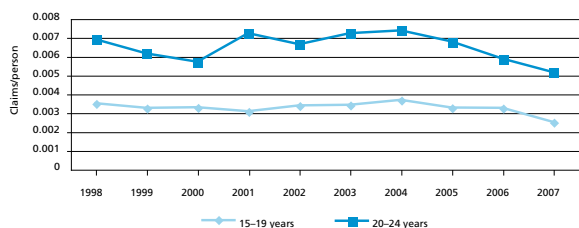


Figure 1: Serious claims by age group and year

Data for male and female workers for the same period also show a temporal decline (Figure 2). Rates for males are approximately double those of females.

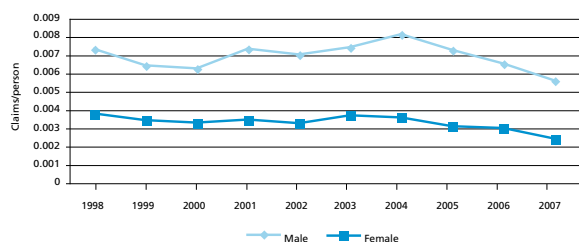


Figure 2: Serious claims by gender and year

All injuries

When all injuries are considered, there is a more noticeable decline. Figure 3 shows consistent declines for 15–19-year-olds as well as 20–24-year-olds.

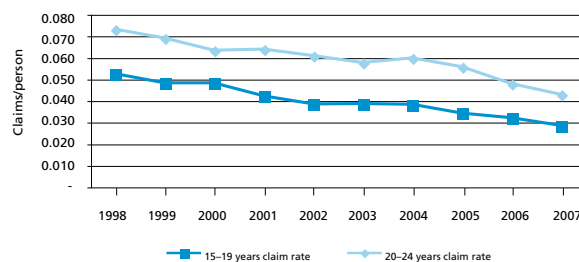


Figure 3: Injury claims over time by age group

Injury claims by gender (Figure 4) show markedly higher rates for male workers compared to female workers. However, the rates are clearly falling in both cases.

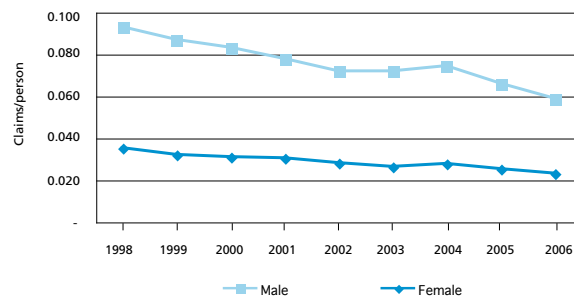


Figure 4: Injury claims over time by gender

Figure 5 shows the percentage of injuries by body location during 2007 for young workers aged 15–24 years. Fingers, thumbs, hands and wrists account for about 31% of the claims. One in 10 claims was for lower back injury.

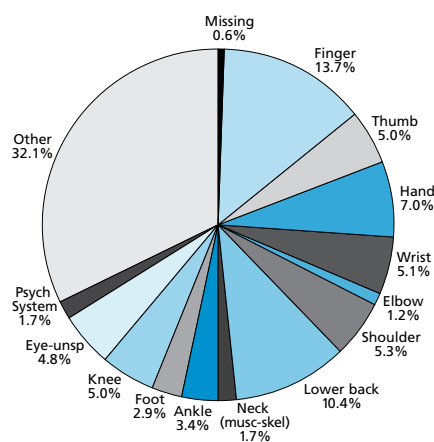


Figure 5: Young workers' injury claims by body location, 2007

Figure 6 shows the absolute number of injury claims by five major industry categories. The highest numbers of claims were found in manufacturing, but these decline rapidly over time. A slight increase in claims in community services is apparent from 2000.

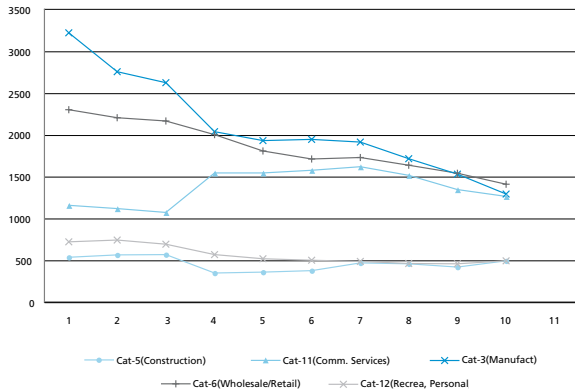


Figure 6: Young worker injury claims for five major industry categories

Figure 7 shows the absolute number of injury claims over time for two industry categories with a high proportion of young workers. A significant reduction has occurred for wholesale and retail trade, which includes supermarkets. The reduction is less apparent for recreational, personal and other services.

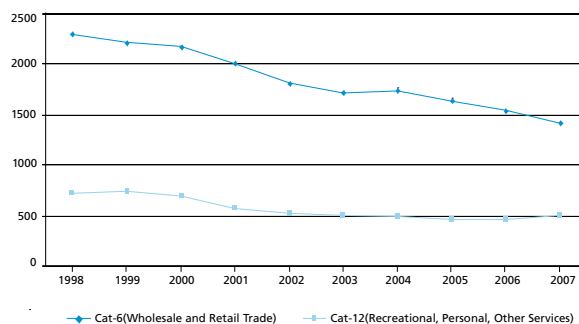


Figure 7: Injury claims over time for two industry categories with a high proportion of young workers

Interpretation

This analysis indicates that young worker injury rates in SA are declining with time. However, the decline is less obvious for serious injuries.

Those in the older age group (20–24 years) and males are more likely to lodge a serious injury claim. This is

consistent with the national statistics for the period 2000–01 to 2005–06, which shows that the number of serious claims decreased by 16%.⁴ However, there has been little change over this period in the proportion of serious claims lodged by male employees compared to female employees (67% and 32% respectively), which is similar to Figure 2.

In terms of all injuries, 15–19-year-olds were less likely to claim than the older age group (20–24-year-olds), and overall injury rates are higher among male compared with female workers. However, there is the distinct possibility of under-reporting and claims lodgement of the more minor injuries. A recent report by Safe Work Australia suggests that young females are the least likely to make a claim.⁵

Although the time trends are encouraging, a significant gap exists between males and females, and the decline in serious injuries is weak. The overall incidence of injury continues to be of concern, with an average of about 1 in 15 young male workers making an injury claim each year.

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