

## **A statistical portrait of the health and safety at work of young workers**

### **Summary**

Young workers are particularly vulnerable to workplace accidents and may also suffer ill health from their work. This summary presents the available European data and offers some explanations as to the reasons for differences seen by younger and older workers.

### **Overview of the labour market situation of young workers**

According to the 2004 Labour Force Survey (LFS), workers aged 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29 accounted for 2.7%, 7.8% and 11.5% respectively of the employed population of the EU25 (Table 1). This means that about 43 million workers in the EU25 are aged 15-29, of which 5 million are aged less than 20 years. The proportion of young workers is higher than average especially in the sectors of wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants and in other service areas. Of course, many people in these age categories are still outside the labour market, mainly because they are studying. According to the 2004 LFS the proportion of people not considered as being in the active labour market population is 76% among those aged 15-19, 35% among those aged 20-24, and 18% among those aged 25-29. The other side of the coin, however, is that among those already in the labour market the unemployment rate is much higher in the younger age categories: 20% among those aged 15-19 and 18% among those aged 20-24, as compared to 9% in the entire working age population.

One can argue that, in terms of provision for health and safety at work, salary workers, full-time workers and workers with an unlimited contract are on average in a better position than self-employed workers, part-time workers or workers with a limited contract duration. Young workers seem to be in an unfavourable situation regarding their full-time/part-time status and the duration of their contracts, while they are more likely to be salary workers than the working population in general. In comparison to the overall workforce, workers aged 15-24 years are less often in full-time employment (72% vs. 82%), more often on temporary contracts (39% vs. 14%), and more often salary workers (94% vs. 83%).

According to the 2000 European Survey on Working Conditions (ESWC), it is slightly more unusual for young workers to feel that their health and safety is at risk because of their work (23% among those aged 18-24 vs. 28% among all workers). Workers aged 18-24 years are generally as likely as others to feel that they are well informed about risks at work (41% vs. 37% overall),



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and to say that they are very or fairly satisfied with their working conditions (83% among those aged 18-24 vs. 84% overall).

### **Safety at work**

The 2002 data given in European Statistics on Accidents at Work (ESAW) shows that there were about 714,000 accidents at work that resulted in more than 3 working days being lost, and about 400 fatal accidents at work among workers aged 18-24 years in EU15. These figures represent 16% of the non-fatal and 8% of the fatal accidents at work recorded by the national authorities of the EU15 that year. The age distribution is obviously different for non-fatal and fatal accidents at work. The incidence rate of non-fatal accidents at work per 100,000 workers was more than 40% higher among those aged 18-24 years as compared to the total workforce or those aged 55-64 years (Table 2). This phenomenon is observed in all sectors of economic activity. Also, the decrease in the incidence rate during 1996-2003 was somewhat smaller among young workers than overall or among older workers (Table 2). For fatal accidents at work the incidence rate is greater among older workers and the decrease in 1996-2002 has been rather uniform across the age categories (Table 2).

Recognition of safety risks at work is the prerequisite for effective prevention. According to the 2000 ESWC, it is about as common for workers aged 18-24 years to feel that their health is at risk of injury because of work (8%) as it is among all workers (7%). According to the same survey, young workers wear some personal protective equipment about as frequently as workers overall (27% of workers aged 18-24 years vs. 25% of all workers wear such equipment half of the time or more at work).

### **Work-related health problems**

The assessment of the non-accidental work-related health burden is complicated. The national recognition systems for occupational diseases are at least indirectly linked to the social security systems, and they differ much more than the national data collection systems for accidents at work. On the other hand, surveys assessing work-related health problems can be carried out in a harmonised way, but they need to rely on the respondent's own assessment concerning the work-related cause of the health problem. The incidence and prevalence of diseases overall increase with age. Furthermore, older workers have on average a longer exposure to risk factors at work, and therefore a greater probability of developing occupational diseases simply because of their longer working careers. Therefore, the comparison of incidence or prevalence of occupational or work-related diseases by age does not necessarily reflect correctly the effect of work-related factors on the health of young workers.



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The 1999 Labour Force Survey ad hoc module assessed the prevalence of self-reported health problems caused or made worse by work. The prevalence rate per 100,000 workers was lower among those aged 15-24 (3,450) as compared to all workers (5,370). Of the three main types of health problems, young workers had a lower prevalence of musculoskeletal problems (1,460 among those aged 15-24 vs. 2650 overall) and of stress, depression or anxiety (540 among those aged 15-24 vs. 1,180 overall) while young workers had a slightly higher prevalence of pulmonary disorders (320 among those aged 15-24 vs. 300 overall).

### Sources of data

1. Eurostat, database: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/>
  - Population and social conditions/Labour market
  - Population and social conditions /Health
2. 3<sup>rd</sup> European Survey on Working Conditions. European Foundation for Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin:  
<http://www.eurofound.ie>



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**Table 1. Proportion (%) of young workers in the total workforce by economic activity in the EU25 in 2004.**

Economic activity	Proportion of young workers			Total workforce in thousands
	15-19	20-24	25-29	N(%)
	yrs %	yrs %	yrs %	
Total	2.7	7.8	11.5	193,573 (100)
Agriculture etc.	2.7	5.2	7.5	9,475 (100)
Manufacturing	2.4	7.9	11.9	36,318 (100)
Construction	3.6	9.0	11.8	15,093 (100)
Wholesale and retail trade etc.	5.1	10.8	12.9	28,241 (100)
Hotels and restaurants	7.9	14.5	13.0	7,833 (100)
Transport, storage etc.	1.2	6.4	10.6	11,982 (100)
Financial intermediation	n.a.	7.5	13.4	5,801 (100)
Real estate, renting etc.	1.4	7.7	14.3	17,888 (100)
Public administration etc.	0.8	5.5	9.5	13,999 (100)
Education	0.6	3.9	9.7	13,939 (100)
Health and social work	1.6	6.4	10.2	18,811 (100)
Other service activities	4.1	9.4	11.8	8,873 (100)
Activities of households	n.a.	6.9	9.6	2,063 (100)

n.a. = not available

**Table 2. Incidence rate of non-fatal and fatal accidents at work by age in 1996-2003 in the EU15.**

Year	Incidence rate (per 100,000 workers)					
	Non-fatal			Fatal		
	18-24 yrs	55-64 yrs	All	18-24 yrs	55-64 yrs	All
1996	5,751	4,063	4,229	3.8	8.7	5.3
1997	5,613	3,671	4,106	3.7	8.9	5.2
1998	5,725	3,602	4,089	3.6	8.1	5.0
1999	5,804	3,577	4,088	3.4	8.0	4.8
2000	5,856	3,475	4,016	3.3	8.0	4.6
2001	5,529	3,325	3,841	2.6	7.4	4.2
2002	5,077	2,953	3,529	3.0	7.0	4.1
2003 <sup>P</sup>	4,711	2,787	3,334	2.6	6.3	4.0
Change in 1996-2003	-18%	-31%	-21%	-32%	-28%	-25%

The 2003 EU15 data is provisional, as the data for PT is still from 2002