



*Jason Foster and Bob Barnettson*

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# Buried and Forgotten

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Newspaper Coverage  
of Workplace Injury and  
Death in Alberta





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## Buried and Forgotten: Newspaper Coverage of Workplace Injury Death in Alberta

Jason Foster and Bob Barnettson  
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## Executive Summary

Newspaper articles are key sources of information about workplace injuries and fatalities. The impressions gleaned from these reports shape how Alberta workers, members of the public, and policy-makers view workplace injury and safety. Yet research on Alberta newspaper articles published between 2009 and 2014 suggests these reports create a misleading picture of workplace injuries and fatalities.

More specifically:

- Women's experiences of workplace injury are almost entirely ignored. This reflects the over-reporting of injuries to men and injuries to workers in blue-collar occupations.
- The vast majority of workplace injuries are never reported. Instead, reporters focus almost exclusively on (relatively rare) occupational fatalities.
- Reporters rely heavily on government and employer sources in the stories. Workers and their advocates are rarely quoted about an incident or its causes.
- Reporters use three basic story templates that frame workplace injuries as under investigation, before the courts, or human tragedies.
- Together, these three media frames create a meta-narrative wherein injuries are isolated events that happen to "others," and for which no one is responsible (except maybe the worker). This, in turn, suggests that the public need not be concerned about workplace safety.

This inaccurate picture of workplace injury may skew public perceptions of workplace injury, with Alberta workers, members of the public, and policy-makers potentially under-estimating the risk of workplace injury. This, in turn, is likely to dampen demand for effective occupational health and safety (OHS) enforcement (which Alberta currently lacks).

If more accurate information was provided to Albertans about the extent of workplace injury and death, more Albertans may be moved to pressure the government to intensify enforcement. Albertans may also directly pressure employers who do not meet their OHS obligations to create a safe workplace. Albertans may choose not to purchase the products and services offered by unsafe employers. And workers might seek employment elsewhere.

The combination of the government's inadequate communication about injuries and newspapers' incomplete coverage creates a situation where Albertans cannot learn of the full extent of workplace injuries and fatalities in the province. In this information vacuum, the issue of Alberta's profoundly unsafe workplaces is obscured and public pressure is not brought to bear on government and employers to make workplaces safer. The ultimate consequence is that workers continue to be needlessly injured and killed on the job.

If newspapers are not the ideal vehicle for communicating information about workplace injuries and fatalities to the public, it may be necessary for the government to make greater efforts to communicate accurate information about workplace injury and death to the public. Improving the amount and quality of information provided to Albertans about workplace injury is the focus of the 10 recommendations which conclude this report.



## Introduction

In 2014, at least 169 Albertans died from work-related causes and over 29,000 were injured so severely they required time off to recover.<sup>1</sup> Despite Alberta's high rate of workplace injury, most Albertans only hear about workplace injuries and fatalities if they know someone who is injured or killed, or if a news outlet runs a story about it.

Limited public awareness about Alberta's high rate of workplace injury lets employers and the government off the hook for creating unsafe workplaces. And poorly informed policy-makers are unlikely to amend rules and practices that will make the occupational health and safety (OHS) system more effective.

At present, media reports are Albertans' main source of information about workplace injuries. As such, these reports play a significant role in shaping the views of workers, the public, and policy-makers about workplace injury. Yet, we know little about how workplace injuries and fatalities are portrayed in the media or how media outlets make decisions about which injuries to cover and how they cover those injuries.

“Newspaper articles profoundly misrepresent who gets injured and how they get injured.”

This report is based upon a study examining 409 newspaper articles published in 101 daily and weekly newspapers between 2009 and 2014 in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> This Western Canadian study extends a study conducted by Tim Gawley and Shane Dixon about newspaper coverage of injury in Ontario. This report focuses, in particular, on the 162 articles published in the 36 Alberta newspapers included in the study. It also relies on interviews with Alberta-based reporters to consider how journalists' use of story templates affects the way workplace injuries and fatalities are presented in newspaper reports.

Overall, the report finds newspaper articles profoundly misrepresent who gets injured and how they get injured. Newspaper articles also consistently frame workplace injuries in ways that suggest workplace injuries aren't an issue requiring action. For these reasons, media reports may be an imperfect vehicle for informing workers, policy-makers, and the public about workplace injury.

While media reports will always be an important source of information about workplace injuries, this analysis suggests there may be a greater role for government in publicizing accurate information about workplace injury. Transparency is a key mechanism for educating the public about workplace safety and creating accountability in the OHS system. Providing more and higher-quality information about workplace injuries to workers, the public, and policy-makers may result in better public policy and safer workplaces.

## Workplace Injury in Canada

Canadian workers are routinely injured on the job. In 2012, there were 245,365 accepted workers' compensation claims for injuries that required time away from work (i.e., lost-time claims) as well as 977 claims for occupational fatalities. That same year, Alberta recorded 27,745 lost-time claims and 145 occupational fatalities.<sup>3</sup> Little progress has been made on improving those numbers in the years since: in 2014, Alberta recorded 29,100 lost-time claims and 169 compensable fatalities.<sup>4</sup>

Although these workers' compensation claim numbers are alarming, they provide only a partial picture of workplace injury. If we include injuries that did not require time away from work, injuries to those outside the workers' compensation system, and unreported injuries, the true number of workplace injuries in Alberta may be up to 10 times higher than workers' compensation data suggests.<sup>5</sup>

“ Although these workers' compensation claim numbers are alarming, they provide only a partial picture of workplace injury. ”

In effect, governments use lost-time claims data to narrow the definition of workplace injury. This narrowing of what is considered a workplace injury results in a dramatic understating of the true level of workplace injury. In turn, understating the true level of workplace injury can influence the degree to which workplace injury is viewed as problematic by workers, the public, and policy-makers.<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, understating injury rates can also hide that Alberta's workplace injury-prevention system is a failure. Controlling for industry differences, Alberta has one of the highest rates of workplace injury in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Alberta workplaces are inspected on average less than once every 14 years, meaning employers face little risk of being caught violating the law. Employers also know that even if they do get caught there is little chance they will be prosecuted or otherwise penalized.<sup>8</sup> The upshot of Alberta's poor OHS enforcement is that workers are needlessly injured and killed each year.

# The Social Construction of Workplace Injury

The systematic exclusion of most injuries from official injury counts reveals that “workplace injuries” have a dual nature. On the one hand, workplace injuries are specific harms experienced by workers. On the other hand, workplace injuries are social constructions. That is to say, workplace injuries are the byproduct of choices made by various actors that contribute to a shared understanding of what is (and isn’t) a workplace injury.

Our individual values, beliefs, and experiences shape what stimuli we pay attention to and how we interpret those stimuli. As we “create” reality, we combine our personal experiences (our “experienced reality”) with knowledge gleaned from other people in our social groups, institutions, and the media (our “symbolic reality”). In this way, symbolic reality—such as newspaper stories—helps us understand, interpret and supplement our experienced reality.<sup>9</sup>

While many Albertans will have some first-hand knowledge of workplace injuries, most of what we know about injuries comes from media reports. What issues the media reports help shape which issues appear important. Similarly, how the media reports the story (i.e., What is the issue? Who is to blame? What are the solutions?) shapes our sense of how to respond to these issues.<sup>10</sup>

For example, if we adopt the view that workplace injuries are caused by worker carelessness, we’ll probably focus on solutions that change worker behaviour. On the other hand, if we view workplace injuries as the product of employer choices about the design of work, we might focus on solutions that eliminate or control the hazards that employers place in workplaces.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if reporting more fully portrayed the nature and scope of workplace injuries and fatalities, along with the factors that lead to these incidents, we might even be inclined to see workplace injuries as acts of violence perpetrated on workers by employers that demand a stronger response, such as criminal prosecution.

Given the importance of media reports in the social construction of issues such as workplace injury, it is important to ask whether newspapers articles (in aggregate) provide an accurate picture of who gets injured and how they get injured. Clear discrepancies between what happens and what gets reported may profoundly skew public opinion and public policy.

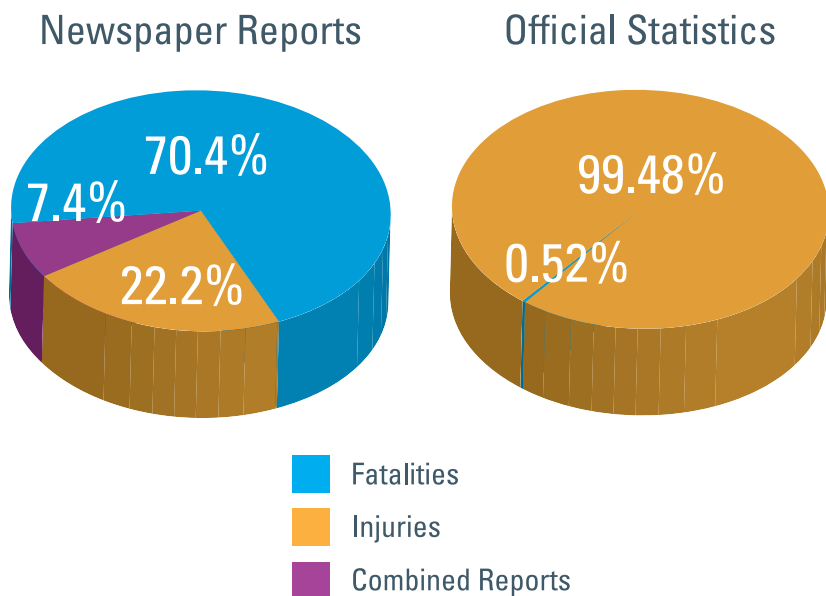
We might also ask whether there are patterns in how the newspaper articles frame a story. A media frame is a cluster of factual and interpretative claims. These claims help readers organize their understandings of issues and prescribe actions and policies, and thus shape the symbolic reality to which we have access.<sup>12</sup> For example, media reports about intimate partner violence (IPV) often emphasize individualized explanations for IPV, such as blaming the victim for not anticipating and preventing the violence. These frames shape how policy-makers and the public approach the issue of preventing IPV.<sup>13</sup>

## Who Gets Injured at Work?

If you relied solely upon Alberta newspapers for information about who gets injured at work, you would think most workplace injuries were fatalities affecting men in the construction and mining, quarrying, and oil industries. This is untrue.

In Alberta, fatalities comprise just 0.52% of all serious reported workplace injuries,<sup>14</sup> but were the subject of 77.8% of Alberta newspaper articles. This bias towards occupational fatalities means that virtually all of the much more numerous non-fatal workplace injuries go unreported by newspapers.

Figure 1: Injuries and Fatalities in Alberta



The occlusion of non-fatal injuries suggests workplace injuries are “deadly but rare,” which is a profoundly misleading characterization. Injuries are, in fact, commonplace and usually mild to moderate in severity.

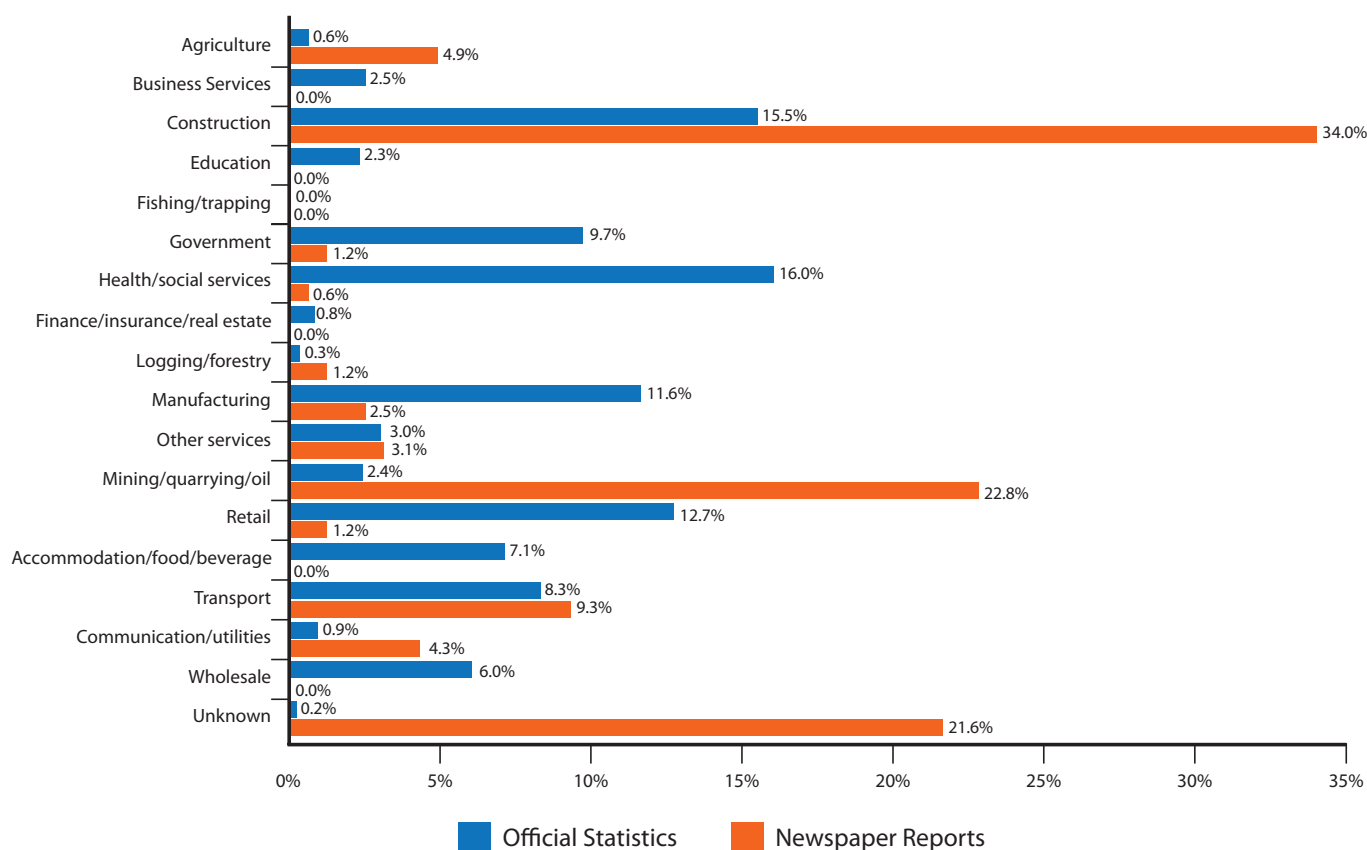
Alberta newspaper reports also have clear gender bias, over-reporting workplace injuries to men. In Alberta, men file 62.5% of all accepted time-loss and fatality workers’ compensation claims. Yet, 91.7% of all newspaper articles were about injuries to men.

The invisibility of injuries to women in newspaper coverage of injuries mischaracterizes who get injured at work. Female-dominated occupations and the hazards common to these occupations are rendered invisible.

Finally, injuries in the construction and mining/quarry/oil industries comprise, respectively, 15.5% and 2.4% of all accepted time-loss and fatality workers' compensation claims. Yet, injuries in these industries were featured in 34.0% and 22.8% of newspaper articles, respectively. This pattern creates the impression that these two industries are the most injurious industries.

By contrast, injuries in the health and social service and retail industries comprise 16.0% and 12.7% of accepted time-loss and fatality workers' compensation claims. Yet injuries in these industries were the subject of only 0.6% and 1.2% of newspaper articles, suggesting to the reader that these female-dominated industries are much less injurious than they actually are.

Figure 2: Injuries and Fatalities by Industry



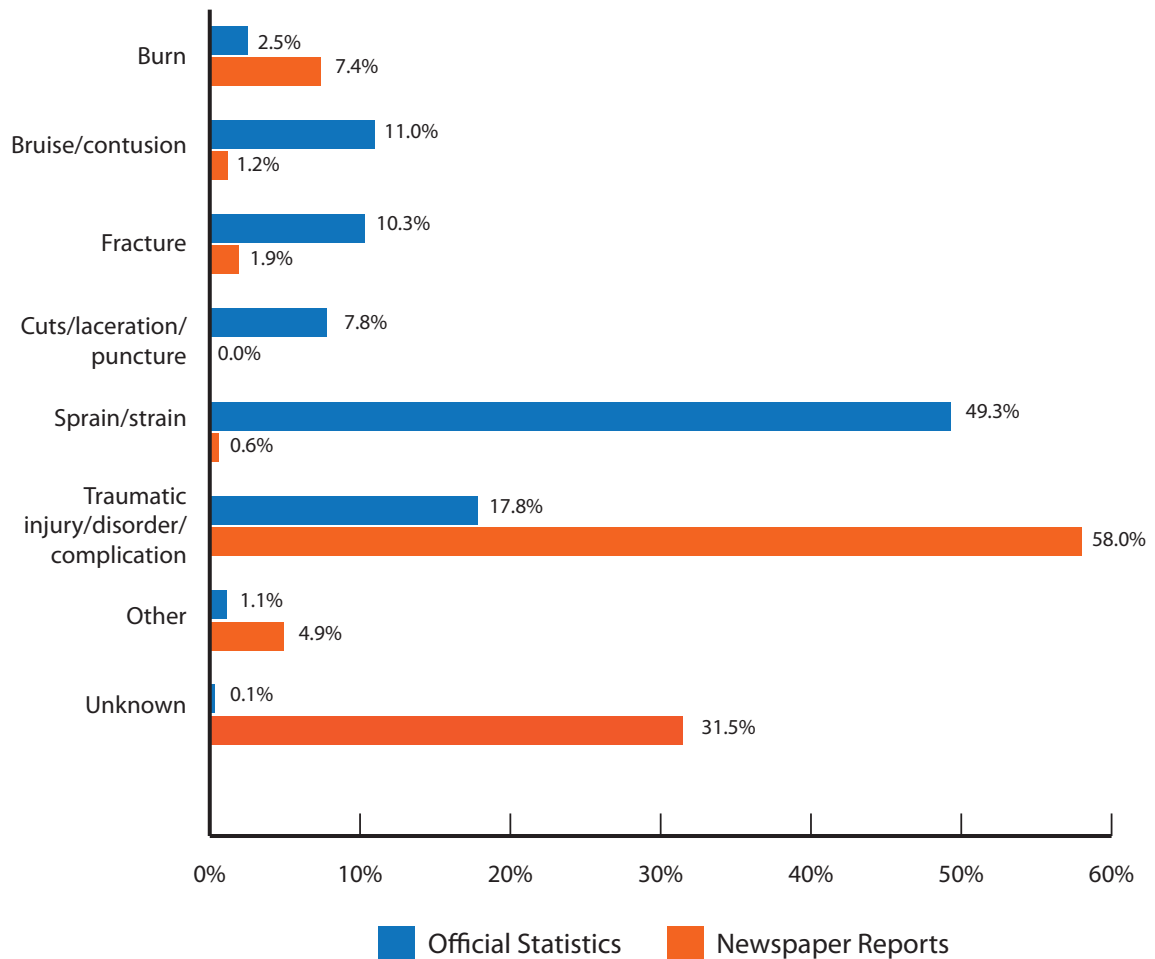
In short, the injuries reported in Alberta newspapers provide a misleading picture of who is injured at work. Workers, policy-makers, and members of the public who rely upon newspaper reports for information about workplace injuries are likely to be misinformed about the frequency and nature of such injuries.

## How Do They Get Injured?

Newspapers also provide a misleading picture of the types and causes of injuries sustained by workers. Traumatic injuries account for 17.8% of all accepted time-loss and fatality workers' compensation claims in Alberta, but were featured in 58.0% of newspaper articles about workplace injuries. Similarly, burns amount to 2.5% of all injury claims, but were featured in 7.4% of all newspaper articles. In short, acute physical injuries received a disproportionate amount of media coverage.

By contrast, the most common kind of injury is the sprain/strain. It accounts for 49.3% of accepted time-loss workers' compensation claims but only 0.6% of newspaper reports about injuries. Bruises and contusions are also under reported at 1.2% of newspaper articles despite comprising 11.0% of claims.

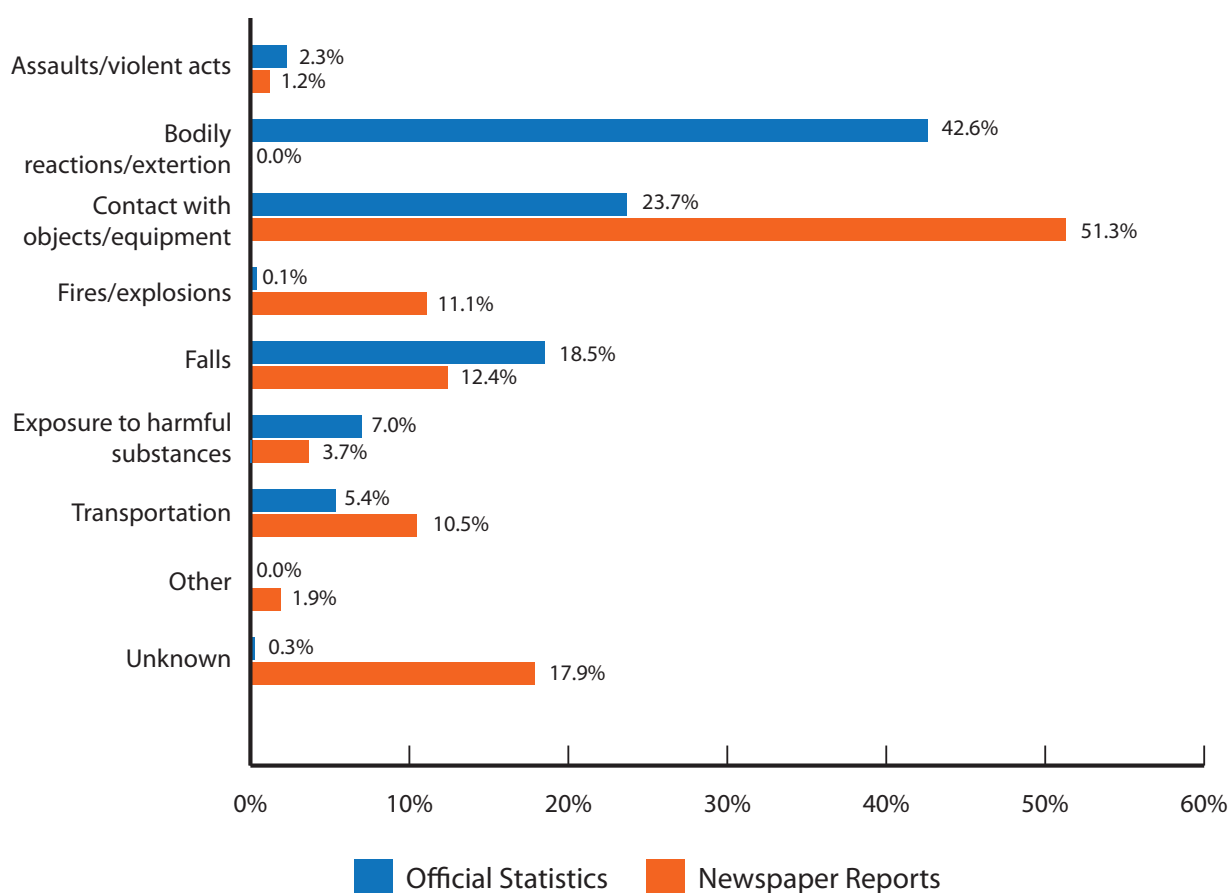
Figure 3: Types of Injury in Alberta



Looking at the causes of injury, we see a similar pattern. Injuries caused by contact with objects and equipment account for 23.7% of workers' compensation claims but were the source of 51.3% of injuries featured in newspaper stories. Injuries caused by explosions and fires account for only 0.1% of all claims but these injuries were the subject of 11.1% of newspaper stories.

By contrast, injuries caused by bodily reactions and overexertions account for 42.6% of workers' compensation claims in Alberta. These injuries were never mentioned in newspaper reports. Overall, newspaper reports misrepresent the most common kinds and causes of injuries by over-reporting the most dramatic forms of injury.

Figure 4: Cause of Injury in Alberta





The over-reporting of traumatic injuries and dramatic causes may make sense from a news perspective (i.e., if it bleeds, it leads). Yet workers, policy-makers, and members of the public who rely upon newspaper reports are likely to be overly focused on traumatic injuries (i.e., burns, massive bodily trauma) caused by dramatic events (i.e., explosions, fires, and contact with objects) and downplay many of the most common injuries, especially those experienced by women, and occupational diseases.

## Media Framing of Workplace Injury

After reading even a handful of newspaper articles about injuries, it becomes obvious that reporters use (consciously or not) three basic story templates (or “media frames”) when reporting workplace injuries.

### ***Workplace Injuries are ‘Under Investigation’***

The most frequent media frame is that an injury is “under investigation.” Typically these articles report on a recent injury. They contain a brief sketch of the facts and invariably conclude by indicating that the incident is under investigation by provincial OHS officers and/or police. For example:

A 58-year-old man has died after being struck by a loader near Slave Lake, a spokeswoman with Alberta Occupational Health and Safety confirmed Wednesday. The man, an employee of Slave Lake-based Vanderwall Contractors, was killed at approximately 7 a.m. Monday on West Mitsue Road, an industrial road southeast of the town. Alberta Occupational Health and Safety investigators attended the scene, said spokeswoman Lisa Glover.<sup>15</sup>

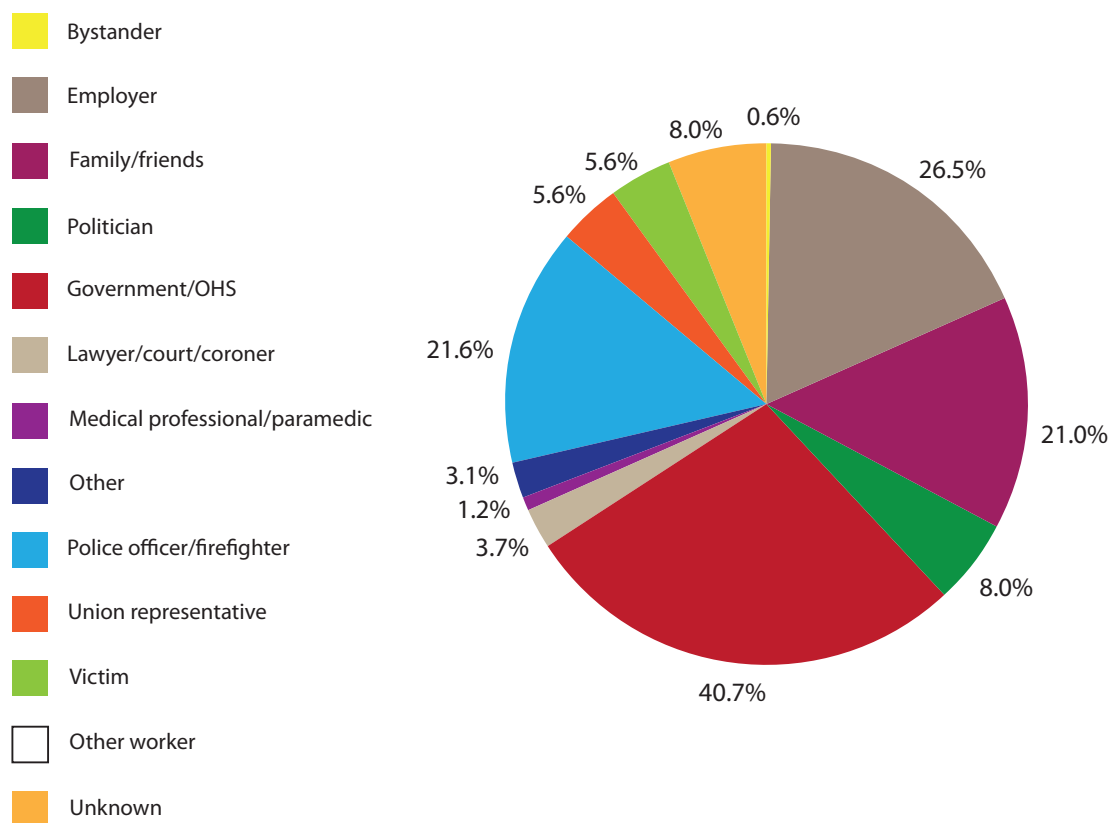
“This lack of context and causality creates a sense that nothing could have been done to prevent the incident.”

These stories tend to be short in length (often a single paragraph, such as the example above) and often use the passive voice to describe the event. This focuses attention on the recipient of the injury (an “employee has been killed”) rather than the (unnamed) actor or agent that caused the injury.

The nature of the work and its contribution to the cause of the incident is usually absent, which means readers cannot understand why the workplace injury occurred. This lack of context and causality creates a sense that nothing could have been done to prevent the incident.

These reports rely heavily on information provided by government officials (e.g., police officers, OHS officers). The result is a factually sparse narrative (the incident is under investigation) that conveys to the reader the sense that someone “in charge” has the incident under control. In the few cases when witnesses are quoted, they add descriptive detail to what happened rather than explaining why an incident occurred.

Figure 5: Who Do Reporters Talk to About Workplace Injury?



*Note: Percentages total more than 100% because of multiple sources in some articles.*

By invariably ending with a line indicating officials are investigating, these articles assure the reader that the government will take care of the matter. The episodic nature of this frame (where each incident is treated in isolation, instead of as part of a broader pattern) obscures that past investigations have not precluded the occurrence of future injuries.<sup>16</sup>

These articles often quoted an employer representative, creating space for the employer to mitigate the reputational risk caused by a workplace injury. In the example below, the employer announces a trust fund for a dead worker's family, thereby changing the story from "who is at fault" to "what a good company":

The 37-year-old from Lacombe fell five metres from a wall. He was the father of five children and had been working as a carpenter foreman for Chandros Construction Ltd. for about three months.

... "To support Darryl's family, Chandros has established a trust fund in his name," company president Tom Redl said.<sup>17</sup>

The employer's charitable act draws attention away from the facts of the situation: the employer had not conducted a hazard assessment nor mitigated the risk of impalement posed by positioning workers above exposed vertical rebar.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, these articles portray the worker involved as similar to a car accident victim. Their name is only rarely given and often the worker is genericized (as seen in the two examples above) as "a 55-year-old man from Town X" or as a "man, an employee of Company Y" or simply listing their occupation. Such descriptions dehumanize the victim by framing the victim as a (often nameless) job holder rather than in a more relatable manner (e.g., a person with hobbies and interests).

### ***Workplace Injuries are 'Human Tragedies'***

A second media frame evident in newspaper reports of workplace injuries is the injury is a "human tragedy." This frame occurs primarily in articles that recount the life story of a killed or (less commonly) injured worker.

These articles typically include an abbreviated summary of the incident followed by reminiscences about the worker's interests, character, life history or social roles as told by a family member, friend or co-worker. Although the details of such reports are highly idiosyncratic, the broad message is that the worker's injury or death was a tragedy. For example:

According to his stepmother, McCutcheon had returned to working in construction about four years ago. "We're going to miss him very, very badly," said Barb McCutcheon. "He truly was a wonderful son, father, grandson and friend. He will (be) sorely missed and we loved him," she said. ...

"There are no words to explain the loss," [company owner] Beaupre said. "He just had the biggest heart. The good ones always seem to leave when they don't deserve to."

He was an avid snowboarder and loved other sports, as well, Beaupre said.

“The guy was such a sporty person. He loved to play hockey. He was always the first one to say, ‘Let’s do this. Let’s go skiing, let’s go riding.’”<sup>19</sup>

Such reports are common around the National Day of Mourning (April 28) for injured and killed workers. Articles adopting the human tragedy frame often use the word “accident,” thereby implying that the injury event was unforeseeable and unavoidable. In this way, the human tragedy narrative omits any discussion of wrongdoing, cause or culpability.

The tragedy in these articles is also constructed as the personal loss and emotional suffering of the families. In contrast to the under investigation frame, the human tragedy frame encourages readers to think of the worker, not as a worker, but as a father/mother/son/daughter with hobbies, interests, and families.

By downplaying the workplace events that lead to the fatality, the human tragedy frame distances the reader connecting the human tragedy to the economic, political, and structural factors that caused the “tragedy” in the first place.

### ***Workplace Injuries are ‘Before the Courts’***

The final media frame evident in newspaper articles about workplace injuries is that the incidents are “before the courts.” The before-the-courts frame primarily appears in articles reporting charges filed or resolved under provincial OHS laws. These articles typically recount the facts of the case (similar to other court reporting) and the penalties imposed.

These reports use technical and passive language (e.g., the employer was convicted of failing to ensure a safe workplace) in lieu of a description of the actual injury and its circumstances (e.g., the employer removed safety equipment and thereby caused a worker to be crushed to death). For example:

A summer trial has been set for three branches of a Calgary development company and its owner after a 2008 workplace death of a dump truck driver.

Perera Development Corp., Perera Development Group and Perera Shawnee Ltd. each have pleaded not guilty to 10 counts under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

A total of 33 charges have been laid.

Dump truck driver Randy Williams was crushed to death Feb. 14, 2008 when a 30-metre wall of soil, rock and debris fell on him at the construction site of a luxury condominium complex at James McKeivitt Road and Shawnee Gate S.W.

Owner Don Perera, a civil engineer with more than 35 years of experience in planning, municipal engineering, consulting and project development, personally faces three OHSA charges.<sup>20</sup>

The example above discusses the charges in a passive tone and does not link the actual incident (crushed by soil and rock) to any employer decisions or actions, thereby obfuscating both the justifications for the charges and the employer's role more broadly in the fatality. Discussing the safety violations in legal terms also distracts from the workplace reality: the employer failed to provide a safe worksite, which led to an injury or fatality.

In many cases, the article implies that the conclusion of the court proceedings means the matter is or will be soon over. This tidy conclusion ignores the ongoing impact of the incident on the worker or the continuing presence of the hazard.

“The article implies that the conclusion of the court proceedings means the matter is or will be soon over. This tidy conclusion ignores the ongoing impact of the incident on the worker or the continuing presence of the hazard.”

In before-the-courts articles, the issue of cause and blame cannot be avoided, however, these reports narrow the focus of blame to legal culpability:

Dreco Energy Services Ltd. received their sentence in Leduc Provincial Court on Dec. 15 after pleading guilty to a charge of failing to ensure their equipment was up to safety standards back on Oct. 6.

Judge White handed the company an \$11,500 fine for the guilty plea.

On Oct. 17, 2008 while working a night shift at Dreco Energy Services Ltd. in Nisku, Paul Chan was electrocuted and subsequently died as a result when he accidentally removed the insulation off a live electrical current while performing welding duties on top of an aerial platform.

Court heard the platform and tools Chan was using minutes before he was electrocuted wasn't according to the manufacturer's specifications and Dreco Energy Services Ltd. failed to adhere to those specifications.<sup>21</sup>

In the above example, the story makes it clear the employer is legally culpable for the death by failing to adhere to specifications, but it does not elaborate on the nature of that failure, the seriousness of the breach or that the company's failures may have a moral dimension. The assignment of blame to the employer—who was responsible for ensuring the work was performed in a safe manner—is very indirect. In fact, the article places most of the blame on the worker and excuses the employer's error as a technical shortcoming. The fatality is cast as simply a regulatory violation addressed via a fine—a violation little different than being fined for speeding or jaywalking.

Also missing in the court-related stories is an analysis of the penalty imposed. The stories outline the punishment factually (e.g., X company was fined \$25,000) but do not provide the reader with comparisons or context from which to judge the appropriateness of the penalty. Fines for similar convictions are not cited, nor are overall trends for OHS prosecutions (although these are publicly available). The penalty is painted as a stand-alone punishment, and its imposition is articulated as resolving the matter. In some instances, government spokespeople go so far as to justify weak penalties:

“It would be easy enough to lay a \$500,000 fine per charge but if [the employer] can’t afford that, if they can’t pay it, they’ll just declare bankruptcy and shut things down. Then there are people without work.”<sup>22</sup>

In this surprisingly candid statement, a government spokesperson laid bare that the economic benefit of employment is more important than punishing employers whose negligence results in a worker death. No further probing or analysis of this statement occurred in the article.

### ***Injury Meta-Frame: Nothing to See Here***

While each of the three media frames construct a different understanding of workplace injuries, taken together these frames they comprise a meta-frame that guides readers’ understanding of workplace injuries. It tells readers that workplace injuries and fatalities are:

1. isolated events
2. that happen to “others”
3. and are “accidents” for which no one is responsible (except maybe the worker), and
4. that we ought not be overly concerned about injuries and fatalities.

First, few articles linked the injury they reported on to previous events or broader patterns of injury. In this way, injuries are reported as one-off events—curiosities of little significance other than to the victim and the victim’s family. Even avid newspaper readers are unlikely to ever learn the result of the investigation or the fate of the worker.

Second, the reports create distance between the reader and the victim. Victims are never portrayed as a whole person: either they are a faceless (and usually nameless) worker who was injured or killed at work or they are a loving spouse/parent/child whom their family mourns, with the work-related particulars of the injury pushed into the background. Presenting only a partial view of the victim diminishes the significance of the event and the factors that led to it.

“The tone of the coverage suggests to readers there is no reason to be concerned about the incident. Workplace injuries are routine happenings that are under investigation or before the courts.”

Third, the tone of the coverage suggests to readers there is no reason to be concerned about the incident. Workplace injuries are routine happenings that are under investigation or before the courts. Some articles even go as far as to assert that the “problem” has been fixed.

Alberta OH&S had lifted the Stop Use Order on the four coke drums damaged in the Jan. 6 fire at the primary upgrading facility at Horizon.

“We have worked with the Occupational Health and Safety investigation team to demonstrate the key changes undertaken to operational procedures, training and facility safeguards,” said an update on the CNRL website. ...

“In addition, we have taken the time during the reconstruction of the facility to significantly strengthen our operations capability and our operational focus on safety across the entire Horizon site,” said the update. ...

[OH&S Spokesperson Barrie] Harrison added the OH&S is confident that the changes and training enhancements made will mitigate any health and safety concerns to their workers.<sup>23</sup>

In general, there is no meaningful engagement with the issue of what caused the workplace injury. A small number of articles report on the proximate (or immediate) cause of incident, such as a worker being crushed when a vehicle rolled forward. But there is rarely any discussion of the root (or fundamental) cause of the incident, such as mechanical failure, faulty job design, pressure to speed up production, or staffing reductions. The absence of this context may reflect that reporting may occur before such information is available and follow-up reporting is rare.

Injuries and fatalities are normally framed as the result of unpreventable “accidents” for which no one is culpable. When there is discussion of cause, it often implies worker error. In the example below, an employer representative asserts that, despite multiple incidents occurring at their construction site over a period of a few months, the issue is not the employer but the actions of the workers who get injured:

“You can have best safety program in the world, but when it comes to the execution of it, sometimes you’re at the mercy of individual people,” he said. “You wonder if they are going to do the jobs that they’re trained at and supposed to do.”<sup>24</sup>

Implications of worker error also come from government spokespeople:

“To state the obvious, it doesn’t matter what you’re jacking up,” [RCMP Media Liaison Wally] Henry said. “It looks like, in this case, the individual tried to take precautions to make his work area as safe as possible, but really, you can’t make things safe enough. People need to double and triple check that everything is in order prior to lifting anything, whether it’s a trailer or lifting a car.”<sup>25</sup>

The quote suggests that despite making some effort, the worker did not do enough double checking to prevent the incident and, by implication the injury is their fault.

““Attention is drawn away from how employer decisions (often made months previously) about what, when, where, and how work is performed may have created an uncontrolled workplace hazard that is the root cause of the injury.””

Such articles leave the reader with the impression that workplace incidents occur as a result of worker decisions and actions. Attention is drawn away from how employer decisions (often made months previously) about what, when, where, and how work is performed may have created an uncontrolled workplace hazard that is the root cause of the injury. The fact that the employer was legally responsible for identifying and controlling such hazards is largely ignored.

Together, reporting frames workplace injuries and fatalities as (1) isolated events that (2) happen to “others,” for which (3) no one is responsible (except maybe the worker), that, as a result, (4) readers should not be overly concerned about.

In this formulation, injuries and fatalities are not moments for outrage or probing deeply into underlying causes. Instead, readers should feel sympathy for the victims and trust in government and employers to fix any problems. This overall framing encourages an approach to workplace incidents that favours the status quo and draws attention away from criticisms of the system and its ineffectiveness at preventing injuries and fatalities.



## Why Do Newspapers Report Injuries This Way?

The job of newspapers is to report news, not to provide a representative picture of workplace injury. Interviews with five journalists suggest that newspaper reporters and editors assess the newsworthiness of a story when they determine whether to report on it:

[W]e don't cover everyone who gets stabbed—there is [sic] usually a dozen stabbings in a day. We only cover them if they are fatal, if there is something about them that is newsworthy like it happens in a Starbucks or it happens in a school. Or there is something unusual about it or if the person dies and it is a young person or if it is a famous person. So that is the kind of standard that we'd apply to [injuries]. ...Usually the ones that get our attention are a fatality. Every time we hear about one, we do a report on that.

“The news value of workplace fatalities caused by acute physical injuries—which disproportionately happen in male-dominated industries—may explain the gender bias found in reporting.”

In short, workplace fatalities are unexpected and often dramatic events with clear, severe, and negative implications to which readers can easily relate. In this way, fatalities differ from workplace injuries and illnesses, which are commonplace events, rarely dramatic or severe, and often entail complex and contested information.

The news value of workplace fatalities caused by acute physical injuries—which disproportionately happen in male-dominated industries—may explain the gender bias found in reporting. Those kinds of incidents simply have more interesting and easily digestible facts. The newsworthiness (or lack thereof) of an event may also explain the episodic reporting of workplace injuries:

It is not like anyone says, “OK, can you follow up on that tomorrow?” Where as with the fire at [a historic movie theatre], that was every single day, “Can you follow up on that?” RCMP shooting, “Can you follow up on that?” So there is just not that same demand the next day.

Indeed, journalists may have little means by which to immediately follow-up on injuries because the government releases (and may have) little information during an investigation. The interviewed journalists noted that human tragedy stories are often driven by particular commemorations, events or celebrations:

If there is a date you can hang it on, you can plan that. Day of Mourning is coming up in four weeks, we gotta find a widow. ... And in some cases, frankly, it is advertising driven. We are doing a special section on the Day of Mourning, we need copy.

“If more accurate information was provided to Albertans about the extent of workplace injury and death, more Albertans might be moved to pressure the government to intensify enforcement.”

Journalists also cited time pressure caused by reductions in staff and other resources which lead to limited opportunities to investigate stories. This, in turn, causes reporters to use the under-investigation and before-the-courts frames as a reliable shortcut:

When I get a press release sent to me about a car chase, or whatever, it is just, “Let’s get this up on the web.” So I just basically rewrite the press release. It is the same with these stories. OHS is giving me a press release and I am just rewriting the press release. So it is a learned format.

All journalists also indicated difficulty in accessing information and witnesses to flesh out the story:

I always contact the workplace to see if they want to comment. Most often they don’t because they know there is going to be an OHS investigation and there is probably going to be a lawsuit arise. ... And sometimes ... the family ... has been told not to talk about it or thinks they shouldn’t talk about it because of litigation or people don’t want to interfere with those processes. Or they don’t really understand it.

As a consequence, the journalists relied heavily on information from government spokespeople. Journalists also reported possessing limited knowledge and receiving limited information about job tasks and injury mechanisms, a factor compounded by high turnover in reporting staff:

Our reporters don’t have enough expertise to ask [the right] questions. ... You are relying a lot on OHS to give you the information.

These factors result in reporters applying news templates used for other kinds of stories in workplace injury stories. Under-investigation stories follow the structure for crime stories while the before-the-courts articles reflect the traditions of court reporting. Not only does applying existing templates make writing the story easier for the reporter, but the templates are also familiar to the reader, making the story more accessible, thus increasing its newsworthiness.

The utility of media frames—that they make complex stories easier to understand—means stories that fit into broadly accepted frames are more likely to be reported. This reinforces the utility of these frames and increasingly crowds out stories that don’t fit within an existing frame. The process is not necessarily intentional—journalists are acting in good faith, making fast decisions, and juggling multiple demands—but its consequences skew the picture of workplace incidents provided to the public.

Overall, work practices and pressures appear to be important factors shaping the use of the media frames identified in this study. Journalists interpret the frames as a byproduct of how newsrooms work and the relatively low priority of workplace-related issues in general. This suggests that the constraints on and limitations of newspaper reports means newspapers may not be the ideal vehicle for communicating information about workplace injuries and fatalities to the public. It is, however, important to note that journalists not only create, but also draw upon our shared (i.e., symbolic) reality. They may be predisposed towards the narratives and meta-narrative that their stories reinforce.

## Impact of Media Coverage of Workplace Injuries

When workers, the public, and policy-makers rely exclusively upon media coverage of workplace injuries and fatalities, they are likely to develop a distorted picture of who gets injured and killed in Alberta workplaces and how. Specifically:

1. The extent and breadth of workplace injury and fatalities is underestimated, leaving a false impression that injuries and fatalities are infrequent, traumatic, dramatic, and affect a narrow group of workers. Other significant sources of injury and death, including occupational disease, are rendered invisible.
2. Workplace injuries and fatalities are cast as unpredictable “accidents” and their cause is either indeterminate or due to worker behaviour. This impression frees employers from being accountable for their obligation to create safe workplaces.
3. Governments are portrayed as having the issue of workplace injuries under control through investigations and prosecutions. The reality (as noted above) is that workplace health and safety enforcement is sparse and uneven, and very few violations are prosecuted. This means that few employers are punished for the injuries and fatalities they cause.

This inaccurate picture of workplace injury may skew perceptions of the issue. Specifically, Alberta workers, members of the public, and policy-makers are likely to underestimate the risk of workplace injury. Underestimating risk, in turn, is likely to dampen demand for more effective OHS enforcement.

This distortion may also negatively affect injury prevention policy. For example, Alberta’s OHS system focuses on education (a demonstrably ineffective approach) aimed at changing worker behaviour (perpetuating the careless worker myth).<sup>26</sup> This approach is contrary to the research evidence that enforcement linked to penalties is the more effective way to reduce injuries because it compels employers to change how they organize work.<sup>27</sup>

Albertans may also directly pressure employers who do not meet their OHS obligations to create a safer workplace—by not applying for work at or purchasing the products and services offered by these employers.

The public has been known to advocate for more stringent safety protections when they become aware of issues, usually around high profile cases such as gas attendants working alone or underage workers. Giving workplace injuries and fatalities a higher profile in general may lead to increased public calls for enhanced workplace safety protection.

The government has an important role in communicating information about workplace incidents. It is currently underperforming in this function. When injuries and fatalities occur, government spokespeople offer (and indeed, may have) only skeletal information so to not prejudice any investigation. Rarely do they release updates as the investigation proceeds. The investigation process and the decision whether to prosecute are strictly confidential and little information is released to the public.

The only regular information the government provides also creates a distorted impression. The government publishes short summaries of all workplace fatalities. These brief paragraphs offer no context and no identification of root causes. A subset of fatalities may eventually see the release of a longer fatality report, but those are read by few. The government does not publish any accounts of investigations into serious injuries.

Annual government injury statistics include only accepted workers' compensation claims for fatalities and time-loss injuries. The primary measure is lost-time claims, which comprise only a small fraction of workplace injuries, and are subject to manipulation by employers (through modified work and other strategies). Reporting only WCB-accepted fatalities eliminates the majority of work-related deaths caused by occupational disease.

The combination of the government's inadequate communication and newspapers' incomplete coverage creates a situation where Albertans cannot learn of the full extent of workplace injuries and fatalities in the province. In this information vacuum, the issue of Alberta's profoundly unsafe workplace is obscured and public pressure is not brought to bear on government and employers to make workplaces safer. The ultimate consequence is that workers continue to be needlessly injured and killed on the job.

## Recommendations

Both Alberta Labour and the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board can contribute to improving the amount and quality of information available to Albertans about workplace injuries and fatalities by implementing the following recommendations.

### ***Alberta Labour***

1. Provide regular updates to the public of all OHS investigations being conducted in the province, including the status and outcome of the investigation, and identification of the causal chain of the incident to demonstrate that the incidents are not “accidents.”
2. Provide regular updates of all prosecutions under the OHS Act, including the current status and final outcome of the case.
3. Provide quarterly reports outlining key information about workplace inspections conducted in the province. Information should include origin of inspection (i.e., complaint, targeted), industry, violations identified, orders and tickets issued, and whether the violation was remedied.
4. Revamp the employer OHS record online database to make it more user-friendly and to provide more information regarding all WCB claims, violations, and prosecutions.
5. Publish an annual list of “worst performing” employers according to a series of OHS benchmarks (e.g., total claim rate, OHS violations, complaints).
6. Sponsor public awareness advertising to more accurately communicate the extent of workplace injury, more accurately reflect the types of injuries workers experience, and identify root causes and employer obligations.

Co-operating with labour and employer groups in the publication and dissemination of this information may increase its reach by targeting both workers and their employers.

### ***Alberta Labour and the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board***

7. De-emphasize the lost-time claim rate in their reporting and create a new measure that more accurately reflects the range and scope of workplace injury in the province.
8. Include demographic and occupational data and more detailed injury information in their annual statistics to more clearly highlight the types of injury different workers experience.

***The Alberta Workers' Compensation Board***

9. Provide an annual report outlining all occupational disease claims, identifying the disease and reasons for acceptance or denial.
10. Provide regular reports to Albertans updating the number of claims made to WCB, the nature of the claims (type of injury, industry, etc.) and reasons for refusal/acceptance.

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