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Albertans getting inaccurate picture of workplace injury

A new Parkland Institute report released today ahead of the April 28th Day of Mourning for workers killed and injured on the job finds that Albertans are getting an inaccurate picture of workplace injuries and fatalities, and both the provincial government and Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) have important roles to play in providing more accurate information to the public.

In *Buried and Forgotten: Newspaper Coverage of Workplace Injury and Death in Alberta*, Athabasca University labour relations professors Jason Foster and Bob Barnetson studied five years of Alberta newspaper coverage of workplace incidents. Their findings include:

- Despite making up less than 1% of workplace incidents, fatalities were featured in almost 80% of articles, creating the false impression that workplace incidents are “deadly but rare.”
- The coverage has a clear gender bias. Injuries to men were featured in 92% of articles, making almost invisible the reality that women experience more than one-third of workplace injuries. Male-dominated industries such as mining and oil and gas were overrepresented in articles, while female-dominated industries such as health and social services were underrepresented.
- Traumatic injuries and dramatic incidents such as fires and explosions dominated newspaper coverage, obscuring the reality of much-more-frequent incidents arising from strains and overexertion.

“Of course it’s understandable that dramatic incidents and fatalities are more newsworthy, and will therefore dominate media coverage,” Foster says. “Unfortunately that reality means most Albertans are seeing a skewed picture of workplace health and safety – one that obscures the fact that the province’s workplace injury-prevention efforts have been an abject failure.”

“Alberta has one of the highest rates of workplace injury in the country,” Barnetson adds. “If policy-makers are serious about meaningfully addressing the unacceptably high toll of workplace injuries, the first step is to take greater responsibility for ensuring the public understands the reality of how, where, and why workers are being injured and killed at work.”

The report concludes with a series of 10 recommendations for Alberta Labour and the Workers' Compensation Board, including regular updates of investigations and prosecutions under the OHS Act, improvements to online databases, and increased public reporting of “worst performing” employers.

Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. The report *Buried and Forgotten: Newspaper Coverage of Workplace Injury and Death in Alberta* is available for download on Parkland’s website at parklandinstitute.ca.

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