On International Workers Memorial Day, working Victorians remember our colleagues whose lives were cut short by work-related factors.

However, the official government work-related fatality tally does not account for the deaths of transport workers or others killed in road accidents, workers who died from illness sustained at work (especially work-related cancers), or suicides related to workplace psychological injuries like PTSD, stress, and bullying.

To better reflect the true cost to the Victorian community of work-related injury and illness, Victorian Trades Hall Council has compiled an analysis of work-related deaths not captured by the Victorian Government’s official statistics.

PTSD & Suicide
Construction workers and truck drivers have some of the highest suicide rates in the country. PTSD and suicide among emergency service workers is rising at an alarming rate. PTSD and mental health are real workplace issues.

The high suicide rates in these industries indicates workers are exposed to mental health hazards that put them at risk of suicide, and that appropriate controls are not in place to mitigate this risk to workers’ psychological safety.

Between 2006-2015, an average of 550 Victorians suicided each year. Reliable suicide statistics for the period between International Workers Memorial Day 2016-17 are not yet available.

Determining a singular factor contributing to suicide is extremely fraught, however an Australian study looking at suicides between 2000 -2007 found that 17% of suicides in Victoria were work-related. Taking that figure as indicative of the proportion of suicides that can be attributed to work-related causes in a given year, we can estimate that work-related stressors, work-related means or workplace location are a factor in an average of 94 Victorian suicides per year.

Lives lost on the road
The road toll for 2016 was 291, of which 28 involved drivers in heavy truck collisions. Although this number does not represent courier drivers, taxi drivers and other people for whom travel is essential to their job, using this average we can approximate the number of road fatalities involving people for whom transport is a workplace and estimate that more than 28 transport workers were killed on Victorian roads in 2016-17.

Work-related cancers
The Cancer Council estimates that work-related exposure is the cause of 10.8% of men’s cancers and 2.2% of women’s cancers. By this estimate, hundreds of Victorians die from work-related cancers each year. However, researchers acknowledge that a lack of reliable local data sources makes conclusive attribution of cancer deaths to workplace causes problematic.
A more conservative estimate would consider only cancer deaths from those cancers most closely associated with workplace exposure, such as mesothelioma. The Australian Mesothelioma Registry has not yet reported on the number of deaths from mesothelioma in 2016. However, over the period from 2011-2015, an average of 83 Victorians died from mesothelioma each year.\(^5\)

Using only mesothelioma statistics does not take into account the wide variety of carcinogens to which Victorian workers are exposed, but for the purposes of our analysis provides a baseline figure to represent a notoriously unknown quantity.

**Gendered violence**

Collection of data of violence in a work context is non-gendered. However Trades Hall’s own research, as presented in the Stop Gendered Violence at Work Report and subsequent government submission shows that workplaces are not immune from the societal problem of violence against women.\(^6\)

We know from media coverage that at least one woman, Stacey Tierney, working as a dancer in the sex industry was killed at her workplace in January this year. The incident was treated as a police matter, however media reports indicate the death occurred both in her workplace and as a consequence of inadequate safety measures in place for workers.

It is likely that other work related in a similar vein gone unreported in the media.

**Conclusion**

Adding together each of the estimated deaths due to work-related suicide, workplace road deaths, mesothelioma, gendered violence, and the official tally of Victorian workplace deaths collected by WorkSafe, we conclude that at least 206 Victorians died because of workplace injury and illness in 2016-17.

Our analysis shows that the true toll of work-related deaths is much greater than that captured by official workplace fatality statistics, which count only 1 in every 8 deaths due to injury or illnesses sustained at work.

The discrepancy relates to state government jurisdictional boundaries and statistical reporting methods that inadvertently obscure a variety of causes of workplace death. In so doing, official statistics absolve employers of their responsibility to address a variety of deadly workplace hazards.

Victorian Trades Hall Council will continue to recognise every work-related death as a preventable tragedy. We remember the dead so that we can fight for the health and safety of the living.
Notes:

5 Mesothelioma in Australia Annual reports for 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015. Average number of annual deaths of Victorians on the mesothelioma register is 89, of which mesothelioma was the cause of death in an average of 92.52% of cases in which cause of death was known.
6 Victorian Trades Hall Council, Stop Gendered Violence at Work, 2016.