



America's Most Dangerous Jobs: Know the Risks and Your Rights

Staying Safe at Work — From the Jobsite to the Open Sea

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The Occupations with the Highest Fatality Rates—and What Workers Can Do to Stay Safe

Earning a Living Shouldn't Cost You Your Life

Every occupation carries some degree of risk. Office employees can slip on wet floors, warehouse workers can suffer lifting injuries, and healthcare professionals may encounter infectious diseases or violent patients. But some occupations expose workers to hazards far beyond those encountered in an ordinary workplace.

Consider the logger operating a chainsaw beside a falling tree, the commercial fisherman working on a storm-tossed vessel, or the roofer balancing high above the ground. These workers perform essential services, often under conditions where a momentary mistake or equipment failure can have devastating consequences.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 5,070 American workers died from occupational injuries in 2024. That represents an average of one worker every 104 minutes. Although workplace fatalities have declined from earlier levels, the figures remain a sobering reminder that occupational safety is a matter of life and death.

Which Occupations Are the Most Dangerous?

The BLS measures occupational danger partly through the number of fatal work injuries per 100,000 full-time-equivalent workers. This allows researchers to compare occupations with very different workforce sizes. The following figures are based on the BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries for 2024, released in February 2026.

Occupation	Fatal injuries per 100,000 workers
Logging workers	110.4
Fishing and hunting workers	88.8
Roofers	48.7
Structural iron and steel workers	37.8
Refuse and recyclable material collectors	37.4
Aircraft pilots and flight engineers	36.7
Construction trades helpers	35.8
Underground mining machine operators	35.6
Truck drivers and driver/sales workers	25.7
Grounds maintenance workers	20.9

For comparison, the fatal injury rate for all occupations combined was 3.3 per 100,000 workers. These figures measure deaths caused by work-related injuries, not every illness or medical condition that might be associated with a particular occupation.

Logging: Working Among Falling Trees and Heavy Equipment

Logging remains one of America's most hazardous occupations. In 2024, logging workers experienced 110.4 fatal injuries per 100,000 full-time-equivalent workers—more than 33 times the national occupational average. The dangers include falling trees, rolling logs, chainsaw accidents, unstable terrain, and heavy machinery. Workers often operate in remote locations where emergency medical assistance may be difficult to obtain quickly.

Safety precautions include properly maintained equipment, protective clothing, adequate training, and carefully planned procedures for felling and moving timber. Even experienced loggers must remain alert, because familiarity with dangerous equipment should never become an excuse for ignoring established safety practices.

Commercial Fishing: A Dangerous Workplace at Sea

Commercial fishing combines the hazards of heavy machinery with the unpredictable conditions of the marine environment. Fishing vessels may encounter rough seas, severe weather, slippery decks, and equipment capable of causing serious injury. Workers face the additional danger of falling overboard, particularly when they are not wearing suitable flotation equipment. Vessel instability and flooding can also turn routine operations into emergencies.

The BLS recorded a fatal injury rate of 88.8 per 100,000 workers in its combined fishing and hunting occupational category for 2024. Commercial fishing is a reminder that workplace safety becomes especially important when employees operate far from immediate emergency assistance.

Construction: Falls Remain a Major Threat

Construction workers face hazards involving heights, heavy equipment, electrical systems, falling objects, and unstable work surfaces. Roofing is particularly dangerous. In 2024, roofers experienced 48.7 fatal injuries per 100,000 workers, placing them among the occupations with the highest fatality rates.

Falls are a major concern throughout the construction industry. Employers must comply with applicable fall-protection requirements, which may involve guardrails, safety nets, or personal fall-arrest systems. Workers should receive appropriate training and equipment before performing hazardous tasks. A safety harness is useful only when it is properly fitted, attached to an appropriate anchorage, and used correctly.

Aviation: Risks Vary by Type of Flying

The BLS reported a fatal injury rate of 36.7 per 100,000 workers for aircraft pilots and flight engineers in 2024. However, aviation occupations differ considerably. Commercial airline operations, agricultural aviation, helicopter services, flight instruction, and other forms of flying involve different working conditions and risks.

Aircraft accidents may result from weather, mechanical problems, operational decisions, or other factors. Aviation safety therefore depends on rigorous maintenance, effective training, careful planning, and sound judgment. The fatality statistics should not be interpreted as evidence that all pilots face the same degree of danger. Nor do they establish that pilots generally have shorter life expectancies than workers in other occupations.

Trash Collection: Dangerous Work on Ordinary Streets

Garbage collection may appear routine, but workers frequently operate near moving vehicles, hydraulic machinery, and heavy containers. They may also encounter hazardous materials and difficult weather conditions. Refuse and recyclable material collectors experienced a fatal injury rate of 37.4 per 100,000 workers in 2024.

Traffic is a particular concern because employees repeatedly enter and exit vehicles, cross streets, and work near motorists who may be distracted or impatient. Safe collection procedures,

visible protective clothing, properly maintained equipment, and awareness of nearby traffic can significantly reduce risks.

Truck Driving: A High Number of Fatalities

Some occupations have exceptionally high fatality rates because relatively few people perform dangerous work. Truck driving presents a different concern: it employs a large workforce and accounts for a substantial number of occupational deaths. In 2024, the BLS recorded 950 fatal injuries among truck drivers and driver/sales workers, with a fatal injury rate of 25.7 per 100,000 workers.

Long hours, fatigue, adverse weather, traffic conditions, and the challenges of operating large vehicles can contribute to serious accidents. Transportation incidents were the leading category of fatal workplace events nationwide in 2024, accounting for more than 38 percent of occupational fatalities. These figures illustrate why both fatality rates and the total number of deaths are important when evaluating occupational hazards.

What Does OSHA Require of Employers?

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 established a broad federal framework for protecting employees against workplace hazards. Under the law's general duty provision, covered employers must provide workplaces free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm. Employers must also comply with applicable OSHA safety standards.

Depending on the occupation and workplace, employer responsibilities may include:

- Providing safe machinery, equipment, and working conditions.
- Identifying and correcting recognized workplace hazards.
- Supplying required protective equipment and appropriate safety training.
- Informing employees about hazardous chemicals and applicable precautions.
- Displaying required safety notices and communicating workplace procedures.
- Maintaining occupational injury and illness records when required.

Recordkeeping requirements are not identical for every business. Many employers with more than 10 employees must maintain OSHA injury and illness records, but certain low-hazard industries are partially exempt. Other employers may have additional reporting obligations. Employers must generally report work-related fatalities to OSHA within eight hours and certain serious injuries, including inpatient hospitalizations, amputations, and losses of an eye, within 24 hours.

Your Rights as an Employee

Workers covered by OSHA have important rights that extend beyond receiving safety equipment. Employees may report unsafe conditions, request an OSHA inspection, and speak privately with an inspector. They are also entitled to information about applicable workplace hazards and required safety training in a language they understand.

Workers generally have the right to review certain workplace injury and illness records and obtain access to relevant exposure and medical records. Most importantly, employers may not lawfully retaliate against employees for exercising protected workplace safety rights. These protections are particularly valuable in hazardous occupations, where employees may feel pressure to continue working despite unsafe conditions.

Can You Refuse Dangerous Work?

Employees sometimes face an immediate dilemma: a supervisor directs them to perform a task that appears likely to cause serious injury. Under federal OSHA rules, workers may have the right to refuse dangerous work in limited circumstances. Generally, the danger must present a genuine and immediate threat of death or serious physical harm, and there must be insufficient time for OSHA to intervene.

Where possible, employees should first ask their employer to correct the danger or assign alternative work. The refusal must be made in good faith, and a reasonable person must agree that the danger is serious. The right to refuse work is not unlimited, so employees should understand the applicable requirements and contact OSHA promptly when uncertain about their rights.

What Should You Do After a Workplace Injury?

An employee injured on the job should obtain necessary medical attention and report the injury to the employer as soon as reasonably possible. Documenting the circumstances can also be important. Employees should record when and where the injury occurred, what equipment or conditions were involved, and whether anyone witnessed the incident.

Most states operate workers' compensation systems that provide benefits for qualifying occupational injuries or illnesses. These benefits may include medical treatment and partial wage replacement, depending on the circumstances. Workers' compensation requirements, reporting deadlines, and available benefits vary by state. Certain occupations, including some maritime and federal jobs, may fall under different compensation systems.

An injured employee may also have legal rights beyond workers' compensation in particular circumstances, such as claims involving responsible third parties. However, those possibilities depend on the facts and applicable law.

Reporting Unsafe Working Conditions

If you believe your workplace presents a serious hazard, begin by reporting the concern to a supervisor or designated safety representative when it is safe and practical to do so. If the problem is not corrected, you can contact OSHA or the appropriate state occupational safety agency. Workers may request confidentiality when filing safety complaints.

Employees who believe they have been punished for raising protected safety concerns should act promptly. Under the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act, retaliation complaints generally must be filed within 30 days, although other laws may establish different deadlines. OSHA can be reached at **1-800-321-6742**, and information about worker rights is available at www.osha.gov/workers.

Safety Is Everyone's Responsibility

The most dangerous occupations are often essential to the nation's economy. Loggers provide timber, fishermen supply food, construction workers build our communities, and truck drivers deliver the goods on which everyday life depends. The risks associated with these occupations cannot always be eliminated, but many serious injuries and deaths can be prevented through proper equipment, effective training, sound procedures, and a workplace culture that places safety ahead of convenience.

Employers have legal responsibilities, but employees also play an important role by following safety procedures, recognizing hazards, and speaking up when something is wrong. **No job should require a worker to choose between earning a paycheck and returning home safely.**

Editor's Note: Originally published March 31, 2020, and substantially revised in October 2026. Occupational fatality figures are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2024 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, released February 19, 2026. This article provides general information about workplace safety and employee rights. Federal and state laws may differ.