

Germany: Fewer fatal work accidents in 2013

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The number of fatal work accidents has fallen in Germany, although the number of occupational diseases has risen, according to a report released in December 2014. However, the Annual Report on Health and Safety at the Workplace also shows that production lost as a result of sickness leave was worth €59 billion in 2013, or 2% of German gross national income.

About

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Background

In December 2014, the Federal Institute for Occupation Safety and Health (BAuA) published its annual report on health and safety at the workplace on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS). The report collects data on occupational health and safety, and calculates the cost of sickness leave (in German).

In 2013, the year covered by the report, 41.8 million people were employed out of a total population of 80.6 million. Most (35.2 million) worked in jobs which were liable for social security contributions. Some 23.5 million were white-collar workers, 8.2 million were blue-collar workers, 2 million were civil servants and 1.5 million were apprentices.

Accidents at work, occupational diseases and disability retirement

The latest data show there were 959,143 work accidents in 2013. Most accidents at work occurred in agriculture (70 per 1,000 full-time employees), followed by construction (58 per 1,000 full-time employees), and water supply, sewerage and waste management (48 accidents per 1,000 full-time employees).

The 606 fatal work accidents in 2013 represent a decrease of 10% from 2010. The majority of these happened at the place of work (483), the remainder happening on the way to or from work (123).

The number of reportable commuting accidents has also declined: 187,971 were registered in 2013, compared with 226,554 in 2010 (a drop of 17%).

The number of registered suspected cases of occupational disease showed a slight increase from 73,425 cases in 2010 to 74,680 in 2013. Skin diseases (32.7%) and noise-induced hearing loss (16.8%) were the most common. However, the number of diagnosed cases of occupational disease amounted to only 16,413 in 2013 (a rise of 3.0% from 2010).

Fewer new cases of disability retirement were notified in 2013 (4,926 cases, down by 20.6% from 2010). In 2013, some 2,357 cases of death due to an occupational disease were notified (a fall of 4.5% from 2012). The costs for the statutory accident insurance rose by 0.9% between 2012 and 2013, to €13.9 million.

Complexity of jobs, work intensity and occupational health

As the report states, occupational health – be it mental or physical health – is closely related to the type of occupation. In addition, the strain exerted on workers by the complexity and demands of their jobs is also an important factor in their mental and physical health.

In cooperation with the Federal Institute for Vocational and Educational Training (BiBB), the BAuA has undertaken a survey of the physical and mental working conditions of 20,036 employees aged 15 and older who work at least 10 hours per week.

Depending on the level of job complexity, different employee groups reported higher or lower levels of work intensity. For example, 74% of those handling complex tasks often had to work on different tasks at the same time. This held true for only 37% in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Some 61% of the participants with complex tasks often worked to tight deadlines and performance pressure (compared with 36% of unskilled or semi-skilled workers). Some 47% in this group were often interrupted during their work (25% of unskilled or semi-skilled workers). Interestingly, a similar share of participants in both groups regarded working at high intensity as a problem (17% of those with complex jobs and 16% of unskilled and semi-skilled workers) .

The survey also looked at health complaints over the previous 12 months. For those with unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, 59% of these complaints involved back pain and 54% pain in the neck and shoulder region. The proportions of people with these complaints (33% and 40% respectively) were much lower for those in complex jobs. Pain in the arms was reported by 39% of the unskilled or semi-skilled workers, but by only 9% of those with complex tasks.

Sickness leaves and incurred costs

Data on sickness leave was also given, derived from the around 29.5 million members of the statutory health insurance institutions in Germany. It should be noted that figures on sickness leave are usually lower than the true figure, since employees do not need to give their employer a sick note from a doctor for sickness leave of up to two days.

Nonetheless, the data show that the total number of cases of sickness leave has been rising in recent years. In 2013, some 126 cases of sickness were notified for every 100 statutorily health insured persons, compared with only 115 cases in 2010. In 2013, the highest incidence of sick leave per 100 insured employees was in metal production (156 cases), the chemical sector (153) and electrical appliance manufacture (152). The lowest figures were reported for agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors (71 cases) and in the hotel and restaurant industry (76).

The average case of sickness lasted for 11.8 days in 2013, as opposed to 12.1 days in 2010. Older employees (45 years and above) took an average of 16.2 days to recuperate with their younger counterparts taking 8.6 days. There are also differences between sectors, with the longest recuperation periods in the transport and storage sector (14.7 days per case), agriculture, forestry and fishing (14.5 days) and in the food industry (13.5 days).

Finally, the report also estimates the approximate cost of sickness leave. In 2013, some 37,824,000 employees were sick for an average of 15 days and production was lost worth €59 billion, or 2% of German gross national income. The gross value-added amount lost was €103 billion.