

# Workplace Experiences of Young Workers in Ontario

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** We examine the workplace experiences of Ontario youth in the service sector, with a particular interest in hazard exposures, safety training and supervision.

**Method:** A cross-sectional telephone survey in 2008 of working youth aged 14-18. Items queried respondents about the tasks performed, worker training and supervision. The study parallels one already published in the US. This is the first Canadian study of its kind.

**Results:** Although teens reported working more hours during vacation, a substantial number of youth are working at least 20 hours per week when school is in session, and many reported having worked after 11 pm on a night before school. Young workers engaged in a variety of hazardous tasks, including heavy lifting, using sharp objects, working with hot equipment, or working around falling objects. A small subset (7.5%) of teens had suffered an injury at work that was severe enough to cause them to miss a day of school or work or require medical attention. The majority of workers had received training on how to use equipment safely and how to avoid an injury. More females than males received training. Although regular check-ins were common, many youth (38%) said they had worked at least part of the day without supervision. Young females were most likely to work without supervision or to work alone.

**Conclusion:** This study questions whether the regulations in Ontario are sufficient to protect young workers from exposures to work-related hazards.

**Key words:** Safety; youth; workplace; hazards; training; supervision

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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In Canada more than 2.9 million 15-24 year olds worked in 2008, or about 67% of Canadian youth.<sup>1</sup> This rate is quite similar to that in the US where 62% of 16-19 year olds work.<sup>2</sup> As in America,<sup>2</sup> the largest proportion of youth (>70%) do their first work in the service sector<sup>3</sup> with the retail trade sector being the largest employer of young workers.<sup>4</sup>

Despite numerous benefits to youth employment,<sup>5</sup> young workers are at a greater risk for workplace injuries than adults.<sup>6,7</sup> According to 2007 Ontario data, workers aged 15 to 24 reported nearly 42,000 lost-time and no lost-time injuries, representing 17% of all claims.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, 43 young worker fatalities were reported between 2003 and 2007.<sup>8</sup> When considering the number of hours young people work, 15-24 year olds are almost 25% more likely than adults to suffer lost-time injuries at work per hours of exposure.<sup>9</sup>

Young workers and supervisors, aged 15 to 24, in the Ontario service industry have indicated that more than half sustained at least one workplace injury, with 28% reporting more than one.<sup>10</sup> Emergency department data reveal that the nature and circumstance of injuries vary by occupation.<sup>11</sup> Reports from the Worker Safety Insurance Board (WSIB)<sup>8</sup> indicate that young males are more than twice as likely as females to suffer lost-time injury and they experience more than two thirds (69.3%) of the no lost-time injury claims.

This study explored the workplace experiences of Ontario youth in the service sector, with a particular focus on hazard exposures, safety training and supervision, and draws on a parallel study in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

## METHOD

### Overview

A cross-sectional telephone survey was used to collect data from 534 Ontario employed youth aged 14-18.\*

\* The aim of the study was to focus on 14-18 year olds, A delay between receiving parental consent and interviewing the teen resulted in a small number (N=6) of the 18 year olds having turned 19 by the time of the interview. As these latter reported on a job they performed while they were 18 years old, we have treated them as 18 year olds.

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**Conflict of Interest:** None to declare.

**Table 1.** Teen Work Settings by Gender and Age Group, Ontario, 2008 (N=534)

Type of Business "What type of service* is (was) this business?"	Female Ages 14-17 (n=216) % (95% CI)	Female Ages 18-19 (n=60) % (95% CI)	Male Ages 14-17 (n=212) % (95% CI)	Male Ages 18-19 (n=46) % (95% CI)	Total (N=534), % (95% CI)
Restaurant & Foodservice	54.5 (45.6-63.4)	44.8 (28.6-61.1)	51.6 (43.5-59.8)	56.9 (38.5-75.2)	52.7 (47.2-58.1)
Retail & Wholesale Distribution	17.1 (10.0-24.1)	37.9 (19.2-56.6)	11.5 (6.51-16.3)	10.3 (1.58-19.0)	16.3 (12.4-21.0)
Tourism & Hospitality	11.7 (6.15-17.2)	6.25 (0.96-11.5)	10.9 (5.87-15.9)	7.47 (0-16.8)	10.4 (7.63-14.1)
Offices & Related Services	2.36 (0.15-4.58)	0	1.38 (0-2.93)	3.34 (0-7.98)	1.84 (0.96-3.49)
Vehicle Sales & Service	1.10 (0-2.87)	1.85 (0-5.48)	0.90 (0-2.16)	1.96 (0-4.72)	1.18 (0.51-2.71)
Other	13.3 (6.31-20.2)	9.16 (0.44-17.9)	21.1 (14.3-28.0)	20.1 (2.82-37.4)	16.6 (12.7-21.5)

Note: Fewer than 2% did not indicate a type of business.

\* The categories in Table 1 define the service sector in the province of Ontario.

**Table 2.** Work Hours for Working Teens Currently Attending School, Ontario, 2008 (N=454)

Characteristic	Ages 14-17 (n=386) % (95% CI)	Ages 18-19 (n=68) % (95% CI)	Total (N=454) % (95% CI) (Weighted)
<b>Number of hours worked per week during the school year (n=454)</b>			
"During the school year-approximately how many hours do (did) you work in a typical week at [REFERENT JOB]?"			
Less than 10 hours per week	25.8 (20.1-31.6)	10.5 (0-22.4)	23.7 (18.9-29.3)
10-19 hours per week	48.4 (42.0-54.8)	56.7 (41.0-72.5)	49.6 (43.7-55.5)
20-29 hours per week	20.3 (15.6-25.0)	28.7 (15.4-42.0)	21.5 (17.4-26.3)
30-39 hours per week	3.20 (1.50-4.89)	2.37 (0-5.87)	3.08 (1.86-5.05)
40 or more hours per week	0.13 (0-0.37)	1.61 (0-3.89)	0.34 (0.11-1.05)
<b>Number of hours worked per week during school vacations (n=451)</b>			
"During school vacations-approximately how many hours do (did) you work in a typical week at [REFERENT JOB]?"			
Less than 10 hours per week	14.3 (9.98-18.5)	3.12 (0-6.81)	12.7 (9.42-17.0)
10-19 hours per week	28.8 (22.9-34.7)	15.5 (6.80-24.2)	27.0 (22.0-32.6)
20-29 hours per week	28.6 (22.6-34.5)	42.1 (25.8-58.4)	30.4 (25.1-36.4)
30-39 hours per week	15.1 (10.7-19.6)	22.2 (9.97-34.3)	16.1 (12.3-20.8)
40 or more hours per week	12.1 (8.19-15.9)	17.1 (6.45-27.8)	12.8 (9.53-16.9)

**Instrument development**

The instrument was modified from that used by Runyan et al.<sup>12</sup> in the US and adapted to reflect Canadian labour law, plus issues based upon recurring themes from previous research.<sup>13</sup> Following approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Laurentian University and by the Office of Research Ethics (ORE) at the University of Waterloo, the instrument was pilot tested with 15 teens for question comprehension and length with the final 40-item instrument programmed into a computer-assisted telephone program, WinCATI 4.2. The University of Waterloo Survey Research Centre handled survey logistics, including pilot testing of the instrument, training of interviewers, data collection and preparation of a data file.

**Sampling**

A compliance sample from the ICOM Target Source Canada survey database was used, consisting of Ontario families who had previously participated in a large-scale national household survey. The sample frame is representative of the Canadian population with regard to provincial distribution, age, gender, household size and household income and was representative of Ontario families.

**Data collection**

Eligibility was determined by the presence in the home of someone aged 14-18 who had worked for at least two months in the service sector in the previous year. Prior to each interview, parents consented and teens assented. Ninety-three percent of parents from

eligible households consented to interviewing of their teen. Non-English-speaking households and households without telephones were excluded.

Interviews took place Monday to Saturday between February and April 2008. The maximum number of call attempts per household was 12 calls. Participation was enhanced by offering a gift card upon completion.

**Data analysis**

Survey sample weights for teens were calculated in three steps: i) a raw weight for each potentially eligible teen in a frame household was calculated as a product of inverse of inclusion probability of household and number of potentially eligible teens in the household; ii) to make the sample better representative of the population, a post-stratification adjustment was made to weights based on the dimension of the region (CMA Toronto and Rest of Ontario), household income and gender for teens between the ages 13 and 17; iii) these adjusted weights were attached to the subsample of eligible teens. We used the 2006 Census as the calibration population.

The estimated participation rates by this weighting scheme were close to the estimates reported in other surveys.<sup>4,14</sup>

Results include the point estimate responses to key questions, with comparisons by age groups and gender. Displayed are percentages, 95% confidence limits (CLs), and means adjusted by the appropriate sampling weights.

**Table 3.** Work Hours Occurring at Night During School Year for Young Workers in Ontario, 2008 (N=454)

	<b>Ages 14-17 (n=423) % (95% CI)</b>	<b>Ages 18-19 (n=75) % (95% CI)</b>	<b>Total (N=498) % (95% CI) (Weighted)</b>
"While working, have you worked on an evening or a night before a school day? Have you..."	84.0 (78.6-88.2)	96.1 (87.4-98.9)	85.69 (81.0-89.4)
...worked past 7 pm on school night?"	91.3 (86.9-95.6)	96.9 (92.1-1.0)	92.17 (88.4-95.9)
...worked past 9 pm on school night?"	73.9 (67.6-80.1)	71.7 (55.9-87.5)	73.5 (67.7-79.3)
...worked past 11 pm on school night?"	28.5 (21.3-35.7)	19.3 (6.7-32.0)	27.00 (20.6-33.4)
<b>Mean number of times in an average week respondents worked specific hours during weeks when school is in session</b>			
"Approximately how many nights per week on average, have you worked (did you work)..."			
past 7 pm?"	2.42 (2.29-2.56)	2.97 (2.61-3.33)	2.52 (2.38-2.65)
past 9 pm?"	2.25 (2.08-2.42)	2.52 (2.19-2.86)	2.29 (2.14-2.45)
past 11 pm?"	1.95 (1.64-2.27)	2.10 (1.15-3.06)	1.97 (1.67-2.27)

**Table 4.** Percentages of Young Workers in Ontario Reporting Specific Activities in the Work Settings by Gender and Age Group, 2008 (N=534)

<b>Work Activities</b>	<b>Female Ages 14-17 (n=216) % (95% CI)</b>	<b>Female Ages 18-19 (n=60) % (95% CI)</b>	<b>Male Ages 14-17 (n=212) % (95% CI)</b>	<b>Male Ages 18-19 (n=46) % (95% CI)</b>	<b>Total (N=534) % (95% CI)</b>
"While working at [REFERENT JOB], have you (did you)..."					
moved (move) or lifted (lift) heavy objects or persons?"	74.3 (67.0-81.5)	58.6 (40.5-76.6)	74.7 (67.2-82.3)	94.7 (89.3-100)	74.9 (69.8-79.3)
used (use) a case cutter, box knife or razor blades?"	47.8 (39.0-56.6)	53.6 (36.9-70.3)	63.6 (55.4-71.8)	71.1 (54.7-87.4)	56.8 (51.3-62.1)
used (use) sharp knives?"	52.0 (43.2-60.9)	45.5 (29.1-61.8)	55.6 (47.3-63.9)	79.0 (65.5-92.4)	55.3 (49.8-60.8)
used (use) grills or ovens?"	31.3 (23.7-38.8)	21.1 (9.49-32.7)	37.6 (29.6-45.7)	40.2 (22.2-58.3)	33.6 (28.8-38.8)
used (use) a deep fat fryer?"	19.6 (13.1-26.0)	18.4 (7.24-29.5)	25.6 (18.4-32.9)	34.1 (16.2-52.0)	23.2 (19.0-28.0)
used (use) a baler or compactor?"	10.0 (5.19-14.8)	15.8 (5.58-26.0)	24.2 (17.6-30.9)	25.3 (10.8-39.7)	17.6 (14.1-21.6)
used (use) a box crusher?"	9.47 (3.59-15.3)	12.0 (2.88-21.1)	20.8 (14.7-27.0)	2.24 (8.74-36.1)	15.4 (12.0-19.6)
used (use) a power slicing tool or grinder?"	11.7 (6.02-17.3)	10.4 (0.89-20.1)	12.4 (7.29-17.5)	30.0 (10.7-49.0)	13.6 (10.2-17.9)
used (use) a dough mixing or rolling machine?"	6.24 (1.63-10.9)	3.40 (0-7.44)	5.57 (2.37-8.77)	11.1 (0-25.9)	6.16 (3.92-9.55)
sold or served alcohol at places where alcohol is consumed by customers?"*	0.93 (0-2.23)	5.83 (0.99-10.7)	1.25 (0-3.28)	10.9 (0-25.9)	2.48 (1.17-5.18)

\* This activity is prohibited by Ontario provincial law for workers <18 years of age. Provincial laws may vary and have additional requirements.

**RESULTS**

**Description of the sample**

Using the American Association for Public Opinion Research standard definitions,<sup>15</sup> the range in response rates was 69.2% to 81.2%. The low-end response rate assumes that the same proportion of unknown eligibility households were eligible to participate as the proportion eligible with known status, and the high-end response rate assumes that all households contacted for which no eligibility information was available were considered not eligible for participation in the survey.

The study population consisted of 534 young workers, of whom 48% were male. The majority (69%) classified themselves as Caucasian with the remainder reflecting the mix within Ontario. The majority were ages 14-17 (216 females, 212 males) while 60 females and 46 males were ages 18-19. Fifty-three percent worked in the food industry while 16% worked in retail and wholesale distribution (Table 1). Ninety-three percent (n=498) of the teens were currently attending school.

**Characteristics of work**

*Work Hours*

As shown in Table 2, all surveyed workers reported higher numbers of weekly work hours during vacations than during the school year. However, work during the school year remains substantial, with nearly a quarter reporting working at least 20 hours per week. In contrast, during vacations, 59% of teens reported working 20 hours or more per week with as many as 17% of 18-19 year olds and 12% of 14-17 year olds working 40 or more hours per week.

Of those who reported working when school is in session, 96% of the older group and 84% of the younger group reported working on a school night. Among them, 29% of 14-17 year olds and 19% of 18-19 year olds had worked after 11 pm, while 74% and 72% respectively had worked after 9 pm (Table 3). On average, teens worked after 9 pm on school nights twice per week.

*Work Activities and Conditions*

Table 4 shows the specific equipment or hazardous conditions youth encountered at work. Almost all older males reported lifting heavy objects or persons, compared to 59-75% of younger males and females of both age groups. More than half the sample reported using sharp objects, including case cutters, box knives, razor blades or sharp knives. A third of respondents had used ovens or toasting equipment and slightly fewer had used deep fat fryers. Forty percent indicated they at least sometimes worked with hot liquids or grease or near hot surfaces that could burn them. Similarly, 59% reported working where floors are slippery because of grease or water. Others reported working where falling objects could hit them (34%). When asked about workplace injuries, 7.5% indicated having been injured badly enough to miss a day of school or work or require medical treatment.

*Training*

Over ninety percent of young workers received some training. Most (87%) had been taught how to use equipment safely. Approximately half received training on sexual harassment (49%), being attacked or threatened (53%) or dealing with drunk or angry cus-

tomers (56%), arguments among co-workers (54%), or robberies (47%). A higher proportion of females than males reported training.

### Supervision

More than one third (38%) of respondents worked at least part of the day without a supervisor present and 14% percent worked completely alone during daylight hours and 17% after dark. Young females were proportionally more likely than older females or males of either age group to work without supervision or alone. Nearly 70% of the overall group indicated they had their work checked at least once a day, with the 18-19 year olds more likely to report daily check-ins than the younger workers.

## DISCUSSION

### Overview and comparisons to the US study

The survey examined 14-18 year olds in Ontario, who worked in the service sector for at least two months prior to the interview. Although prior Canadian data suggested the retail sector as the largest employer of young workers,<sup>4</sup> the youth in this sample worked primarily in the food industry, with retail and wholesale distribution representing the second most common job sector.

The large majority of these youth attended school, with most working less than 20 hours per week and increasing the number of hours worked during vacations. Among those attending school, more worked past 9 pm and 11 pm on a night before having school the next day, compared with their American counterparts. These differences, especially in the proportions of youth working after dark, may be attributable to federally governed work hours in the US<sup>16</sup> prohibiting youth under age 16 from working after 7 pm on school nights.

Most of the young workers had received some kind of training. As was the case in the US study,<sup>12</sup> the most common types of training addressed the safe use of equipment and how to avoid getting hurt. Training in general, and safety training in particular, are areas of great importance, including the development of legislation requiring employers to train new and young workers prior to their commencement of employment.

Supervision is a major factor in workplace safety,<sup>17</sup> particularly among young workers.<sup>18</sup> As in the US, most young workers reported that while their work was checked at least once a day, many worked without a supervisor present for at least part of their shift. Compared to their US counterparts, Canadian youth were more likely to have worked alone.

### Uniqueness and limitations

The current study is the first in Ontario providing a comprehensive look at young worker safety involving current employees.

Our sample of 18 year olds is small, given that we would expect the older youth to be working at proportions greater than that of the younger ones. This may cause limitations in the precision of estimates. Furthermore, the survey relied on self-reports, making recall or social desirability biases a potential concern. However, as in the US study, recall biases were minimized by having respondents focus only on their most recent service sector job. Finally, households with cell phones only were not included in this survey.

### Implications

This study raises a number of questions about whether the regulations in Ontario are sufficient to protect young workers. In an effort to ensure their presence in school during the crucial developmental years, Canadian youth under the age of 16 cannot be employed during normal school hours.<sup>19</sup> Youth are working a considerable amount of hours, even during the school year. Perhaps Ontario should consider restricting the number of hours a teen can work, as is the case in other provinces, such as Prince Edward Island, for example.<sup>20</sup> The number of hours and the late nights that teens are working are of concern given teens' sleep patterns.<sup>21</sup> Also, demanding and stressful activities can interfere with adolescents obtaining adequate rest at night and contribute, in turn, to anxiety, depression and fatigue,<sup>22</sup> potentially increasing the risk of injury at work<sup>23</sup> as well as negatively impacting extracurricular activities and school performance.<sup>24</sup> The issue of working after dark, particularly after 11:00 pm, raises further questions about risks associated with robberies, an issue documented in the US.<sup>25</sup>

Most youth indicated some level of supervision, but quality remains unknown. Poor supervision is recognized as a major factor in young worker injuries.<sup>26</sup> It is important to examine further this issue and consider whether different regulatory and/or training approaches could improve the quality, extent and type of supervision for young workers. For example, Lewko and Volpe<sup>27</sup> suggest the use of real-life scenarios as a potential training tool, but the effectiveness has not yet been assessed.

Finally, there are currently no laws in Ontario comparable to those in the US that prohibit youth from engaging in the operation of the hazardous tools examined in this study.<sup>28</sup> Further consideration of this issue could inform policy development.

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## RÉSUMÉ

**Objectifs :** Examiner le travail des jeunes de l'Ontario dans le secteur des services en nous attachant particulièrement à l'exposition aux risques, à la formation SST et à la supervision.

**Méthode :** Enquête téléphonique transversale menée en 2008 auprès de jeunes travailleurs de 14 à 18 ans. Les questions portaient sur les tâches effectuées, la formation des travailleurs et la supervision. L'étude s'inspire d'une étude parue aux États-Unis. C'est la première du genre au Canada.

**Résultats :** Les adolescents disent travailler plus d'heures durant les vacances, mais un bon nombre travaillent au moins 20 heures par semaine durant l'année scolaire, et beaucoup disent travailler passé 23 h même quand ils ont de l'école le lendemain. Ces jeunes effectuent des tâches diverses, dont soulever des objets lourds, manipuler des objets tranchants, travailler avec de l'équipement chaud ou travailler autour d'objets qui tombent. Un petit sous-groupe (7,5 %) avait subi au des blessures suffisamment graves au travail pour manquer un jour d'école ou de travail ou pour nécessiter une visite médicale. La majorité des travailleurs est formée à l'utilisation sécuritaire de l'équipement et à la prévention des accidents. Plus de filles que de garçons reçoivent une formation. Les vérifications périodiques sont courantes, mais beaucoup de jeunes (38 %) disent travailler au moins une partie de la journée sans supervision. Les filles sont plus susceptibles de travailler seules ou sans supervision.

**Conclusion :** Cette étude met en doute le fait que la réglementation ontarienne protège suffisamment les jeunes travailleurs contre les accidents du travail.

**Mots clés :** sécurité; jeunes; lieu de travail; dangers; formation; supervision



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CPHA's strength is its members who give us credibility, direction and authority. To continue to be the voice of Public Health, CPHA needs your expertise and support.

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