



## ***RAACWI Injured Worker Health Survey Panel – Phase I (2008-2009)***

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Any workplace injury has consequences for workers and their families, but if the injury has led to a permanent impairment, the challenges are likely greater. To better understand the impact of work injury and permanent impairment on health and employment, investigators at Trent University surveyed injured workers with permanent impairments from across Ontario. The study aimed to capture a sense of what life is like for workers in this situation, looking at trends in health and work situations.

494 surveys with 195 men and 299 women were completed. All had filed first-time claims with the WSIB following a workplace accident that resulted in a permanent impairment. Survey respondents were aged between 25 and 57. Half of them lived in larger cities. The remaining respondents were split between medium-sized cities and smaller communities. The study helps us better understand the labour-market and health outcomes of permanently impaired workers. This information is useful for identifying needs and designing programs to respond to them.

### **Survey Highlights**

- Stress, chronic pain and medication use were common among respondents.
- Almost half said that most days were quite a bit or extremely stressful. Personal health, financial situations and work were the major sources of stress.
- Almost half were unemployed. Those who were employed after their injuries experienced losses in income and benefits.

### **About the injury**

All survey respondents received a Non Economic Loss (NEL) award. A NEL is received if a workplace injury results in a permanent impairment. The NEL is based on the percentage of total bodily impairment as assessed by the WSIB. Forty one per cent did not know the percentage of impairment at which they were assessed, or did not recall it. Of those who did recall the percentage, 90% reported receiving an assessment of 35% or less.

What caused the permanent impairment?

- Forty per cent said that over-exertion was the main cause, while half had a repetitive strain injury.
- Almost seven in 10 had an "invisible" injury.
- Nearly half of respondents had multiple injuries following the workplace accident.

### **Health profiles**

Stress, chronic pain and medication use were common. Although more than half of the participants reported good-to-excellent health at the time of the survey, 75 per cent said their health is somewhat or much worse than before the workplace injury. Stress also took a large toll. Almost half of the participants said that most days were quite a bit or extremely stressful. Personal health, financial situation and work (or lack of work) were cited as the major sources of stress.



In addition, a variety of chronic health conditions were reported. Almost 70% said they had a chronic pain disorder. In most cases, the diagnosis was made after the workplace injury. The specific health issue and the percentage of workers reporting them were:

- back pain (55%)
- nerve pain (49%)
- mobility impairment (44%)
- repetitive strain injury (RSI) (42%)
- arthritis (41%)
- depression (40%)
- musculoskeletal pain (39%)
- high blood pressure (26%)

Onset of the injury (before/after workplace accident)

- 55% reported a diagnosis of back pain – for 83% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 49% reported a diagnosis of nerve pain – for 94% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 44% reported a diagnosis of a mobility impairment – for 96% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 42% reported a diagnosis of repetitive strain injury (RSI) – for 89% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 41% of you reported a diagnosis of arthritis – for 72% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 40% reported a diagnosis of depression – for 80% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 39% reported a diagnosis of musculo-skeletal pain – for 92% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury
- 26% reported a diagnosis of high blood pressure – for 65% this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury

In addition, many reported the following difficulties:

- sleeping problems (74%)
- numbness in the limbs (69%)
- stigma as an injured worker (66%), from a co-worker, work supervisor, WSIB staff, medical doctor or prospective employer
- problems concentrating (48%)
- an anxiety problem (38%)

One-quarter of participants said they had been hospitalized in the year before the survey. A third of these hospitalizations were reported to be related to workplace injuries.

Four in 10 reported being unable to receive necessary health care over the past year. In most cases, this was for a physical problem, but some also reported needing treatment for an emotional or mental health problem.

Many managed pain with medications. Eighty per cent reported using medications regularly, at least once a week. Sixty per cent regularly used four or more medical drugs. However, some reported being unable to get medications or use them as often as directed because of costs. Four in 10 did not use recommended medications because of side effects.



## Employment and wages

There were substantial changes in work situations among many workers. Even those who had work before and after their injury experienced losses in income and benefits. More than half of the workers were employed at the time of the survey, mostly in a single job rather than multiple jobs. Among employed survey participants, about half were in the same or similar job as before the injury, half remained with the same employer. A small percentage didn't indicate their current work status. In total, 38% of all participants were unemployed at the time of the survey, and 2% were retired, mostly involuntary. Those who were unemployed indicated that their health condition or disability affected the ability to look for work. In fact, one-third reported they were permanently unable to seek work. Many also said that they could not find work that accommodated their health or abilities.

Becoming a worker with a permanent impairment was associated with changes in job security, income levels and a variety of benefits for those employed after the injury. Specifically, the following changes were reported after the injury:

- permanent job status (dropped 12%)
- average annual income before deductions (dropped from \$39,000 to \$32,000)
- hours of work per week:
  - part-time work (increased by 5%)
  - full-time work (dropped by 31%)
- union coverage (dropped by 11%)
- retirement pension plan (dropped by 14%)
- extended health plan (dropped by 16%)
- prescription drug coverage (dropped by 19%)
- dental plan (dropped by 18%).

Our concern is that employment benefits are particularly needed after a worker has sustained a permanent impairment. Further, loss of secure (permanent, full time) work, income and benefits no doubt has serious consequences for the family of an injured worker – as well as for the worker her/himself.