



BRIEFLY...

COVID-19: OSHA NEEDS TO DO MORE TO ADDRESS HIGH INJURY RATES OF WAREHOUSE WORKERS

September 27, 2023

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

OSHA's mission is to ensure safe and healthful working conditions for workers nationwide, including the about 1.6 million at the nation's nearly 20,000 warehouses. Warehouse workers face hazards that can result in serious injury due to powered industrial trucks, loaded pallets, and the repetitive movements involved. These dangers can be compounded when time-based delivery quotas are used to drive production goals.

With high-speed fulfillment of online orders becoming the industry standard, some warehouse workers must work even faster. Consistently high rates of injury and illness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that warehouses were and continued to be dangerous places to work.

WHAT OIG DID

We conducted this performance audit to determine:

To what extent has OSHA addressed high injury and illness rates at warehouses (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic)?

To answer this question, for October 1, 2016, through December 31, 2021, we analyzed relevant data, interviewed OSHA officials, and reviewed guidance and regulatory standards.

WHAT OIG FOUND

We found OSHA's actions had not effectively addressed the high injury and illness rates occurring in warehouses. Injury and illness rates among establishments classified as warehouses have been consistently high: in 2021, the rate was 5.5 per 100 employees, more than double the rate across all industries.

Despite consistently high injury and illness rates at 5.1 percent over the audit period, OSHA conducted a limited number of warehouse inspections: a total of 3,762, which amounts to an annual average of 4.1 percent of the establishments self-classifying as warehouses. Also, 82 percent of these inspections were unprogrammed, primarily driven by complaints and referrals.

OSHA also did not target nor inspect enough warehouses through its site-specific targeting programs, designed to reach establishments with high rates of injuries and illnesses. The number of establishments targeted versus inspected indicate workers remain vulnerable to high rates of injury and illness.

Further, OSHA had limited visibility into the numbers and types of injuries and illnesses occurring in warehouses, including those classified as online retailers. This occurred because OSHA collected minimal injury data from employers and did not effectively enforce mandatory employer reporting, leaving warehouse workers at risk to hazards that can result in serious injury and illness.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

We made seven recommendations to OSHA to improve its efforts to ensure warehouse workers' safety and health. OSHA provided comments but did not directly address the recommendations.

READ THE FULL REPORT

<https://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2023/19-23-013-10-105.pdf>