

BULLETIN

No. 21-19

November 18, 2021

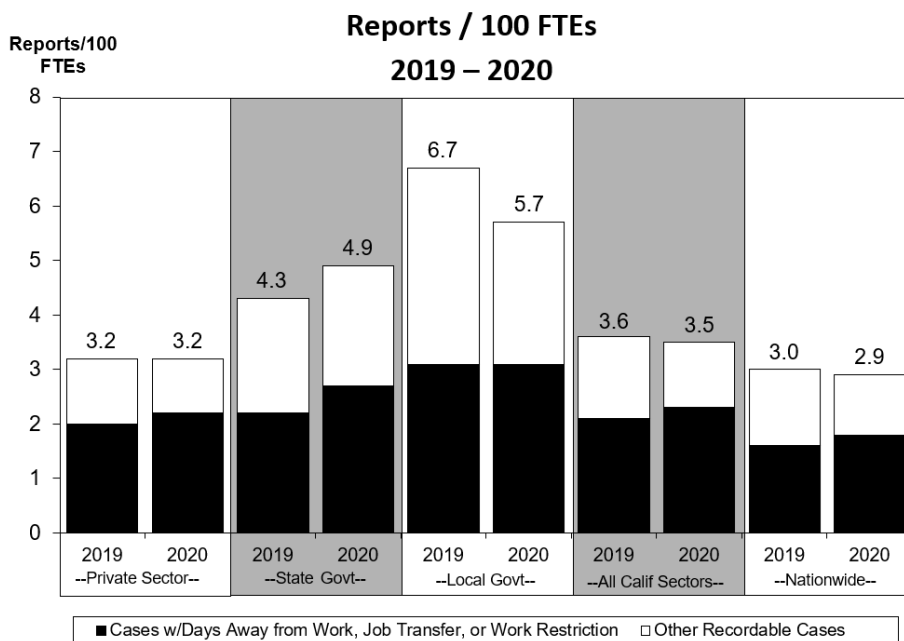
Despite the addition of thousands of job-related COVID-19 cases, the total number of nonfatal work injuries and illnesses in California fell 7.2 percent in 2020, though the pandemic exacted a heavy toll on statewide employment so the nonfatal work injury and illness rate per 100 full time employees (FTEs) showed little change according to new data from the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR).

A report by the DIR Director's Office of Policy, Research and Legislation (OPRL) uses estimates generated by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses (SOII) to provide an alternate view of the state's work injury and illness experience than workers' compensation claim counts, as the survey includes cases reported by employers for which workers' comp claims may or may not have been filed. Rather than counting indemnity and medical-only claims, the survey tallies cases that resulted in days away from work, as well as those that resulted in restricted work activity or job transfer ("DART" cases); and those that were not DART cases but were recorded on OSHA 300 or OSHA 301 incident reports because they involved treatment beyond first aid or a diagnosis of significant injury or illness ("other recordable" cases).

The 2020 survey results show that public and private employers in California reported an estimated 448,300 nonfatal work injuries and illnesses last year, which was 35,000 fewer than the estimated total for 2019. At the same time, however, the pandemic drove the state's unemployment rate up from 3.9 percent at the end of 2019 to a record 15.5 percent by April of 2020, and even though the state has now regained about 2/3 of the lost jobs, the statewide unemployment rate for all of 2020 came in at 10.2 percent versus just 4.2 percent in 2019.

That steep drop in covered employment largely offset the impact of the declining number of reported job injuries and illnesses on the work injury and illness frequency rate. As shown in the chart, the overall work injury and illness rate in California registered only a marginal decline between 2019 and 2020, falling from 3.6 to 3.5 cases per 100 FTEs. Two-thirds (296,100) of the 2020 recordable injuries and illnesses in the state were DART cases, which was up from 59 percent in both 2018 and 2019, while "other recordable cases" accounted for a declining share of the 2020 cases. The distribution of California work injuries and illness cases among private sector, local government, and state government workers underwent a notable shift last year, as the number of cases per 100 FTEs in the private sector held steady at 3.2, while state government employees' rate jumped from 4.3 to 4.9, and the local government sector, which includes many public safety officers, teachers, and transit workers, and consistently has the highest work injury and illness rate in the state, fell from 6.7 to 5.7.

California & Nationwide Work Injury & Illness Rates by Sector



A closer look reveals that the increase in the work injury and illness rate among state government workers last year was primarily driven by DART cases, as the rate of cases involving days away from work, restricted work activity, or job transfers in this sector rose from 2.2 to 2.7 per 100 FTEs, while the rate of “other recordable” cases only edged up from 2.1 to 2.2. The incidence of DART cases also increased in the private sector between 2019 and 2020, climbing from 2.0 to 2.2 cases per 100 FTEs, but the overall work injury and illness rate in the private sector showed no change as the rate of other recordable cases fell from 1.2 to 1.0. Meanwhile, the decline in the overall work injury and illness rate for local government employees was entirely due to a sharp drop in the incidence of “other recordable” cases, which fell from 3.6 to 2.6 cases per 100 FTEs, while the incidence of DART cases in this sector held steady at 3.6.

The DIR and similar agencies in other states conduct the annual OSHA Injury and Illness Census in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Nationwide, the BLS estimates that private employers and state and local governments reported 3.229 million work injuries and illnesses in 2020, which was down 7.7 percent from a year earlier. That works out to a rate of 2.9 cases per 100 FTEs, down from 3.0 cases per 100 FTEs in 2019, though the slight year-to-year decline in the overall rate nationwide masks a significant shift in the mix of work injury and illness cases, as the incidence of DART cases nationwide increased from 1.6 to 1.8, while the incidence of other recordable cases declined from 1.4 to 1.1. Comparing the nationwide figures for 2020 to those from California shows that California accounted for 13.9 percent of the work injuries and illnesses cases in the U.S. – including 14.7 percent of all DART cases and 12.5 percent of the other recordable cases. California’s overall injury and illness rate of 3.5 was well above the nationwide rate of 2.9 as the incidence of DART cases was much higher than the nationwide rate (2.3 vs. 1.8 cases per 100 FTE) though the incidence of other recordable cases was only slightly higher (1.2 vs. 1.1).

The impact of the pandemic on the work injury and illness results is evident in the 2020 data, both nationwide and in California. For example, although the overall volume of work injuries and illnesses declined across the U.S., breaking the nationwide data out separately for injuries and illnesses shows that the overall decline was driven by a sharp drop in the number of nonfatal injuries in the private sector, as private industry employers reported 2.1 million nonfatal injuries in 2020, down from 2.7 million in 2019 – not surprising given the number of workers who lost their jobs or began working remotely during the pandemic. In contrast, with the introduction of COVID cases into the occupational illness mix, total reported illness cases nationwide more than quadrupled from 127,200 cases in 2019 to 544,600 cases last year. That increase in illness cases nationwide was fueled by a nearly 4,000 percent increase in private sector employer-reported respiratory illness cases, as the number of these cases across the U.S. skyrocketed from 10,800 cases in 2019 to 428,700 in 2020, which means that the incidence of work-related respiratory illness cases during the first year of the pandemic increased from 1.1 to 44.0 cases per 100,000 FTE. Notably, the BLS also reports that last year there were 1.176 million nonfatal injuries and illnesses that caused private sector workers to miss at least one day of work (32.4 percent more than in 2019), and one third (390,020) of those cases were categorized as other diseases due to viruses not elsewhere classified, which includes COVID-19-pandemic related illnesses.

More details and data tables from the 2020 nonfatal injury and illness surveys for California are posted on the Department of Industrial Relations Director’s Office of Policy, Research and Legislation web page at <http://www.dir.ca.gov/OPRL/Injuries/2020/Menu.htm>. Nationwide results for 2020, along with information on the impact of the pandemic on the Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses and the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, scheduled to be released this month, are on the U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics website at <http://www.bls.gov/iif/home.htm>.

BY

Copyright 2021, California Workers’ Compensation Institute

CWCI members and subscribers may go to www.cwci.org and log in to access CWCI Bulletins under the Communications tab and Research reports under the Research tab. Public information is also on the website, and nonmembers may order annual subscriptions to Bulletins and Research reports from the online store.