



Employee Safety

OSHA's Top 10 Safety Violations: What They Cost in 2021

James Langford | Apr 14, 2022

An Occupational Safety and Health Administration rule detailing what steps employers must take to protect workers from falling on the job remained the agency's most frequently violated regulation for the 11th straight year, costing more than \$29 million in fines in 2021 alone.

Not only are such accidents common, they're deadly: Workplace falls were the leading cause of construction fatalities, accounting for more than a third of the 1,008 deaths in the most recent year for which U.S. Labor Department statistics were available.

Falling hazards have led OSHA's Top 10 Most Frequently Cited Violations list for so long because "they are present in so many workplaces," Patrick Kapust, deputy director of enforcement programs, told *Safety + Health magazine*, a National Safety Council publication, when the preliminary 2021 findings were reported. Risks range from improper use of stairways, ladders and scaffolding to unprotected floor holes and wall openings.

"Employers need to evaluate their workplaces to identify and abate fall hazards on a continual basis," Kapust told *Safety + Health magazine*, "not just once at the beginning of a job or process."

The second- and third-most common violations in 2021 involved rules governing respiratory protection, which took on heightened importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and correct use of ladders.

Kapust disclosed the preliminary list based on the government's budget year from October 2020 through September 2021 at the National Safety Council's Safety Congress & Expo a month later. Final data is typically reported after the first week in April, according to the agency's website.

Read more: How to Choose the Right PPE: Fall Protection Harness

"Throughout the pandemic, workplace safety has become more important than ever," Safety Council President Lorraine Martin says. "Although incredible advancements are made in safety each year, the OSHA Top 10 list reminds us that we must continue to pinpoint areas where we can improve so we can better prioritize workplace safety in the future world of work."

Here's a closer look at the 10 most frequently violated OSHA standards in 2021. The rankings are based on OSHA's preliminary list and include updated, but not yet definitive, figures on citations and penalties. Changes since the preliminary results were announced may prompt a reordering of some items on the final list.

No. 1: Fall Protection violations

Standard: *1926.501*

Citations in 2021: 5,579

Fines in 2021: \$29.5 million

OSHA imposes a variety of rules to protect workers from on-the-job falls, from mandating precautions such as guardrails on walkways or open floors more than 6 feet above ground to ensuring floor strength and putting covers on holes. Construction companies received 5,450 citations for violating these rules last year, by far the most of any industry, followed by manufacturers, which received 37.

No. 2: Respiratory Protection

Standard: *1910.134*

Citations in 2021: 2,201

Fines in 2021: \$4.58 million

The standard's primary goal is to prevent atmospheric contamination with substances including noxious dust, gases and fumes, if possible by using less toxic materials, confining or enclosing the operation and providing adequate ventilation, according to OSHA. When those measures are insufficient, employers are required to provide respirators capable of protecting workers from exposure-related hazards. Manufacturers received the most citations, 743, for violating the regulation, followed by healthcare and social assistance companies, which received 715.

No. 3: Ladders

Standard: *1926.1053*

Citations in 2021: 2,146

Fines in 2021: \$5.88 million

Portable ladders used in workplaces are generally required to be strong enough to carry at least four times the maximum intended load, according to OSHA; an exception is made for extra-heavy-duty models capable of carrying 300 pounds, where that multiple is narrowed to 3.3. OSHA also sets standards for rung spacing, shape and design. As with fall protection, construction firms were given the most citations for failing to comply with this standard last year. They received 2,087, followed by manufacturers with at least 16.

No. 4: Scaffolding

Standard: *1926.451*

Citations in 2021: 2,117

Fines in 2021: \$6.45 million

OSHA standards for scaffolds include requirements that, in most cases, they be sturdy enough to support their own weight plus four times the maximum intended load without failing. Specifications are also set for width of walkways, use of guardrails and safety harnesses as well as resistance to tipping over. Construction businesses received 2,035 citations for scaffolding violations, topping industries from manufacturing to waste management and real estate.

No. 5: Hazard Communication

Standard: 1910.1200

Citations in 2021: 2,296

Fines in 2021: \$3.17 million

OSHA requires employers to inform workers about the hazards of all chemicals to which they might be exposed on the job, whether they're produced at a site or simply used there. Along with a hazard communication program, employers are expected to use labels where appropriate, provide safety data sheets and arrange training. (Food, alcoholic drinks, cosmetics and medical devices are generally exempt when covered under legal requirements established by either the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Agriculture or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.) Manufacturers were given 796 citations for violating hazard communication requirements in 2021, outpacing fields from construction to retail and waste management.

No. 6: Lockout/Tagout for Hazardous Energy

Standard: 1910.147

Citations in 2021: 1,895

Fines in 2021: \$12.3 million

OSHA's lockout/tagout standard sets procedures for disabling machinery or equipment to prevent release of hazardous energy—including electrical, mechanical, hydraulic, chemical and other types—during service or maintenance. Craft workers, machine operators and laborers are among the 3 million workers who maintain equipment and thus face the greatest risks, the agency says. OSHA issued 1,400 citations for violating lockout/tagout rules to manufacturers in 2021. That placed the field ahead of sectors from waste management to construction and mining.

No. 7: Fall Protection Training

Standard: 1926.503

Citations in 2021: 1,728

Fines in 2021: \$3.07 million

Employers are required to provide training on workplace falling hazards as well as procedures and equipment designed to prevent such accidents, from guardrails to safety nets, personal safety harnesses and controlled access zones. The lion's share of fall-protection training citations in 2021 went to construction businesses, which received 1,685 and outpaced fields from waste management to manufacturing, utilities and retail.

Read more: 5 Quick Tips for Passive Fall Protection

No. 8: Eye and Face Protection

Standard: 1926.102

Citations in 2021: 1,510

Fines in 2021: \$4.87 million

Employers are required to ensure their workers use appropriate eye or face protection, including masks, goggles and safety glasses, to guard themselves from hazards such as flying particles, molten metals, acids or caustic liquids and chemical gases. OSHA's rule includes provisions governing prescription lenses, cleaning, disinfecting and comfort. The construction industry received 1,493 citations for

violating eye- and face-protection rules last year, outstripping fields from manufacturing to waste management, healthcare and real estate.

No. 9: Powered Industrial Trucks

Standard: *1910.178*

Citations in 2021: 1,622

Fines in 2021: \$5.75 million

This rule sets safety guidelines for construction, use and maintenance of workplace equipment such as fork trucks, platform lift trucks and motorized hand trucks—not vehicles used on farms or those intended for over-the-road hauling. Powered industrial trucks are required to meet the design and construction specifications set out in the “American National Standard for Powered Industrial Trucks, Part II, ANSI B56.1-1969.” Manufacturers were given 704 citations for failing to comply with the standard last year, significantly more than fields from construction to transportation and retail.

No. 10: Machine Guarding

Standard: *1910.212*

Citations in 2021: 1,281

Fines in 2021: \$10.7 million

Federal regulations require use of machine guards such as barriers, two-hand activation controls and electronic safety devices to protect operators of potentially hazardous equipment and others in the area. Risks include flying chips, sparks and nip points created when parts move toward each other or past a stationary object where they could trap limbs, causing injuries from bruising to cuts and even amputation. OSHA issued 1,012 citations to American manufacturers for violating rules on machine guarding last year, placing the industry far ahead of fields from retail to waste management, agriculture and construction

Which of OSHA’s Top 10 safety violations are the biggest concerns in your workplace and how do you handle them? Tell us in the comments below.

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