

# A GRIM PATTERN: Presidential voting and workplace deaths

By Paul Feldman  
FairWarning

More than 4,800 American workers are killed on the job each year. But in states that were carried by Donald Trump, the chances of dying at work are higher than in states that Hillary Clinton won.

With a single exception, the states that voted Republican had at least three job-related deaths per 100,000 workers, according to the most recent federal labor statistics for 2015. In all but two states that went Democratic, the workplace death rate was less than three.

Two states that Trump won by landslide margins, North Dakota and Wyoming, had the highest fatality rates of 12.5 and 12.0 per 100,000 workers, respectively — more than four times the death rates of most states that went for Clinton.

A key factor, experts say, is that red states tend to have a higher percentage of hazardous blue-collar jobs, while the more urbanized blue states have more white-collar and service jobs. “The big cities where Hillary got most of her votes are not where the foundries, the mills, the logging, the mines are,” said Adam Finkel, a former OSHA official now at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

And with the Trump Administration and Republican Congress pledging sweeping cuts to federal regulations, which they say will spur economic growth, some analysts warn that workers in states that voted for Trump could be in greater peril.

“Workers and citizens in states in which a majority voted for Trump have much to lose if the Trump Administration weakens enforcement or reduces support for health, safety and employment standards,” said Professor Thomas A. Kochan, co-director of MIT’s Institute for Work and Employment Research. “Trump states have, on average, weaker state-level laws and enforcement agencies than do states that have stronger Democratic histories.”

Since the relatively small number of workplace deaths can give rise to random variations, particularly in low population states, analysts caution against giving too much weight to the statistics. Nevertheless, the most recent data follow a pattern of death rates being higher in the South and Appalachia and lower in New England and the West Coast, said John Mendeloff, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.

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as skilled, easier to replace, that probably gives lesser incentives for safety to employers,” Mendeloff said. “In other words, the costs of accidents are lower.”

The pattern is strikingly similar to the link between state voting preferences in the November election and traffic death rates. As FairWarning reported earlier this month, the states that favored Trump consistently had higher traffic fatality rates than the states that backed Clinton.

Since the Occupational Safety and Health Administration was created in 1970 during the tenure of President Nixon, workplace deaths have shrunk nationwide from 38 a day to 13, agency data shows.

During that period, which also saw the enactment of such measures as the Mine Safety and Health Act, the death rate for miners has dropped by more than 75 percent, according to research by the National Employment Law Project, an advocacy group for low wage workers.

Although Trump’s controversial first nominee for labor secretary, Andrew Puzder, withdrew and his replacement R. Alexander Acosta has yet to be confirmed, efforts to scale back workplace protections are already underway.

The Senate voted to strike down an Obama-era rule requiring businesses seeking federal contracts to disclose previous labor violations — anything from wage-and-hour abuses to workplace hazards. The move came under the Congressional Review Act, which Republican lawmakers are using to target a number of environmental and health rules enacted during the Obama Administration.

Also vulnerable is an OSHA regulation requiring companies to submit workplace injury rates for posting on the Internet. Interest groups including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Chicken Council filed suit in federal court in Oklahoma to have the measure overturned.

OSHA has yet to reply to the lawsuit, and it’s uncertain how, or if, the agency will defend the rule. But in a sign of the times, among the first people dispatched by the Trump Administration to the Labor Dept. was long-time business lobbyist Geoffrey Burr, who as a vice president of Associated Builders and Contractors fought both the requirement for federal contractors to disclose labor violations and the electronic filing of injury rates.

Business groups contend that federal regulations are weighing down the economy. According to Eric J. Conn, a Washington, D.C., attorney who specializes in defending OSHA cases, government rules “when taken collectively, can stifle job growth.”

Cutbacks in labor protections would reverse the approach of the Obama Administration, which stepped up enforcement and upgraded safety standards for exposure to silica, beryllium and other hazards.

“If they start cutting back on enforcement and do fewer inspections, I think that will likely lead to more workplace deaths,” said David Michaels, assistant secretary of labor in charge of OSHA during the Obama Administration. “Many employers don’t need OSHA to motivate them to protect their workers, but others clearly do.”

“Where are the trenches and where are the derricks?” Finkel asked. “The hazards are in the red counties and so that’s where the death toll will rise if all of a sudden there was no enforcement or if there was a rollback of existing regulations.”

For whatever reason, workplace death rate statistics for 2015 almost precisely mirrored 2016 presidential voting results.

The only red state with a death rate lower than 3.0 was Arizona (2.4).

The lowest death rates were in dependably blue states ranging from the very largest to the very smallest — California at 2.2, Washington and Massachusetts at 2.1, Delaware at 1.9, and Rhode Island at 1.2.

*(Editor’s Note: This story was reported by FairWarning (www.fairwarning.org), a nonprofit news organization based in Pasadena, Calif., that focuses on public health, consumer and environmental issues.)*

## POLITICS AND WORKPLACE DEATHS

The most recent national statistics, for 2015, show that states that favored Donald Trump in the November election, marked in red, have higher rates of workplace fatalities. States that backed Hillary Clinton, in blue, have lower death rates.

State	Deaths per 100,000 full-time workers
North Dakota	12.5
Wyoming	12.0
Montana	7.5
Mississippi	6.8
Arkansas	5.8
Louisiana	5.8
South Carolina	5.6
Kentucky	5.5
Oklahoma	5.5
Nebraska	5.4
West Virginia	5.0
South Dakota	4.9
Idaho	4.8
Texas	4.5
Kansas	4.4
Missouri	4.3
Georgia	4.3
Alaska	4.1
New Mexico	4.1
Indiana	3.9
Iowa	3.9
Ohio	3.9
Alabama	3.7
Tennessee	3.7
Wisconsin	3.6
Nevada	3.5
North Carolina	3.4
National	3.4
Utah	3.2
Florida	3.1
Michigan	3.1
Pennsylvania	3.0
Colorado	2.9
Illinois	2.9
Vermont	2.9
Virginia	2.8
Minnesota	2.7
New Hampshire	2.7
New York	2.7
Oregon	2.6
Connecticut	2.6
Hawaii	2.6
Maine	2.5
Arizona	2.4
Maryland	2.4
New Jersey	2.3
California	2.2
Washington	2.1
Massachusetts	2.1
Delaware	1.9
Rhode Island	1.2

SOURCE: U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS/  
STATE OCCUPATIONAL INJURIES, ILLNESSES,  
AND FATALITIES REPORT FOR 2015  
[HTTPS://WWW.BLS.GOV/IIF/OSHSTATE.HTM](https://www.bls.gov/iif/oshstate.htm)

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