

Why GAO Did This Study

OSHA relies on employer injury and illness records to target its enforcement efforts. Questions have been raised as to whether some safety incentive programs and other workplace safety policies may discourage workers' reporting of injuries and illnesses. GAO examined (1) what is known about the effect of workplace safety incentive programs and other workplace safety policies on injury and illness reporting, (2) the prevalence of safety incentive programs as well as other policies that may affect reporting, and (3) actions OSHA has taken to address how safety incentive programs and other policies may affect injury and illness reporting. GAO reviewed academic literature, federal laws, regulations, and OSHA guidance; surveyed a nationally representative sample of manufacturing worksites; and interviewed federal and state occupational safety and health officials, union and employer representatives, and researchers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OSHA provide guidance about safety incentive programs and other workplace safety policies consistently across the agency's cooperative programs, and add language about safety incentive programs and other workplace safety policies to the guidance provided to inspectors in its field operations manual. OSHA agreed with the recommendations, and noted its plans to address them.

View [GAO-12-329](#). For more information, contact Revae Moran at (202) 512-7215 or moranr@gao.gov.

WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH

Better OSHA Guidance Needed on Safety Incentive Programs

What GAO Found

Little research exists on the effect of workplace safety incentive programs and other workplace safety policies on workers' reporting of injuries and illnesses, but several experts identified a link between certain types of programs and policies and reporting. Researchers distinguish between rate-based safety incentive programs, which reward workers for achieving low rates of reported injuries or illnesses, and behavior-based programs, which reward workers for certain behaviors, such as recommending safety improvements. Of the six studies GAO identified that assessed the effect of safety incentive programs, two analyzed the potential effect on workers' reporting of injuries or illnesses, but they concluded that there was no relationship between the programs and injury and illness reporting. Experts and industry officials, however, suggest that rate-based programs may discourage reporting of injuries and illnesses. Experts and industry officials also reported that certain workplace policies, such as post-incident drug and alcohol testing, may discourage workers from reporting injuries and illnesses. Researchers and workplace safety experts also noted that how safety is managed in the workplace, including employer practices such as fostering open communication about safety issues, may encourage reporting of injuries and illnesses.

The Two Types of Safety Incentive Programs

<p>Rate-based programs Reward workers who had few or no reported injuries or illnesses during a set time period</p>	<p>Behavior-based programs Reward workers for behaviors such as reporting near-miss incidents or recommending safety improvements</p>
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Source: GAO analysis of workplace safety literature.

In 2010, from its survey, GAO estimated that 25 percent of U.S. manufacturers had safety incentive programs, and most had other workplace safety policies that, according to experts and industry officials, may affect injury and illness reporting. GAO estimated that 22 percent of manufacturers had rate-based safety incentive programs, and 14 percent had behavior-based programs. Almost 70 percent of manufacturers also had demerit systems, which discipline workers for unsafe behaviors, and 56 percent had post-incident drug and alcohol testing policies according to GAO's estimates. Most manufacturers had more than one safety incentive program or other workplace safety policy and more than 20 percent had several. Such programs and policies were more common among larger manufacturers.

Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is not required to regulate safety incentive programs, it has taken limited action to address the potential effect of such programs and other workplace safety policies on injury and illness reporting. These programs and policies, however, are not addressed in key guidance such as OSHA's field operations manual for inspectors. OSHA has cooperative programs that exempt employers with exemplary safety and health management systems from routine inspections. One such program prohibits participants from having rate-based safety incentive programs, but guidance on OSHA's other cooperative programs does not address safety incentive programs. Similarly, OSHA inspectors and outreach specialists provide information to employers about the potential benefits and risks of safety incentive programs, but the guidance provided to inspectors in its field operations manual does not address these programs.