

Actual Data Tell Very Different (and very good) Story on Worker Safety

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Opponents of natural gas have settled on a strategy of trying to build a new and pathos-driven narrative around the oil and gas industry – namely, that the work it does is exceedingly dangerous, and no amount of oversight can make it safe. However, the industry’s number one priority is safety. This commitment comes across in pretty vivid detail for those who take just a second to look at the actual facts

Unable to pick-up a whole lot of traction on their standard set of claims and accusations, opponents of natural gas have settled on a strategy of trying to build a new and pathos-driven narrative around the oil and gas industry – namely, that the work it does is exceedingly dangerous, and no amount of oversight can make it safe.

Part and parcel of this strategy is to get folks to believe that oil and gas companies don’t care about their workers, and that they routinely put their employees’ lives in direct danger just to make a quick buck. Josh Fox’s new short film, which he calls “[CJ’s Law](#),” attempts to advance this narrative.

Unfortunately for Josh – and fortunately for our workforce – a review of available state and federal data suggests the narrative is completely unmoored from reality.

Now, make no mistake: not a single death or a serious bodily injury that happens at an industrial worksite is acceptable to anyone. Truth is, though, some accidents have occurred over the years, notwithstanding the fact that employee safety is, and will always remain, **the** top priority. And when accidents do occur, the consequences are real, and severe, and widely felt. Anyone who tells you different is simply not telling you the truth.

Of course, though, Fox isn't just saying that oil and gas companies don't care about their employees, as ridiculous as that may be. He's also saying that the industry's track-record on safety is pretty bad, a contention echoed by a friendly reporter in E&E News [in a piece filed](#) the week after Josh's new video hit (and featuring the same interview subjects as Josh used). But again we ask: what do the actual data say about the industry's safety record. While we have [examined](#) this issue [before](#), it's certainly worth revisiting, especially given the seriousness of the accusations.

First-off, let's acknowledge right at the top that some element of risk is attached to just about every job anyone would have in America. Whether you're a flight attendant, a crossing guard, a bartender, a foreman at a construction site, a technician at a water treatment facility, or a contractor on a drilling rig – there's always going to be some risk in doing what you do, even as billions of dollars are invested in technology and processes aimed at reducing and managing it.

But come on: working on a rig is more dangerous than working behind a bar, right? Not according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

According to BLS [statistics](#), the fatality rate for “mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction” is lower than a lot of other industries you might be surprised to see on this list. Here are just a few:

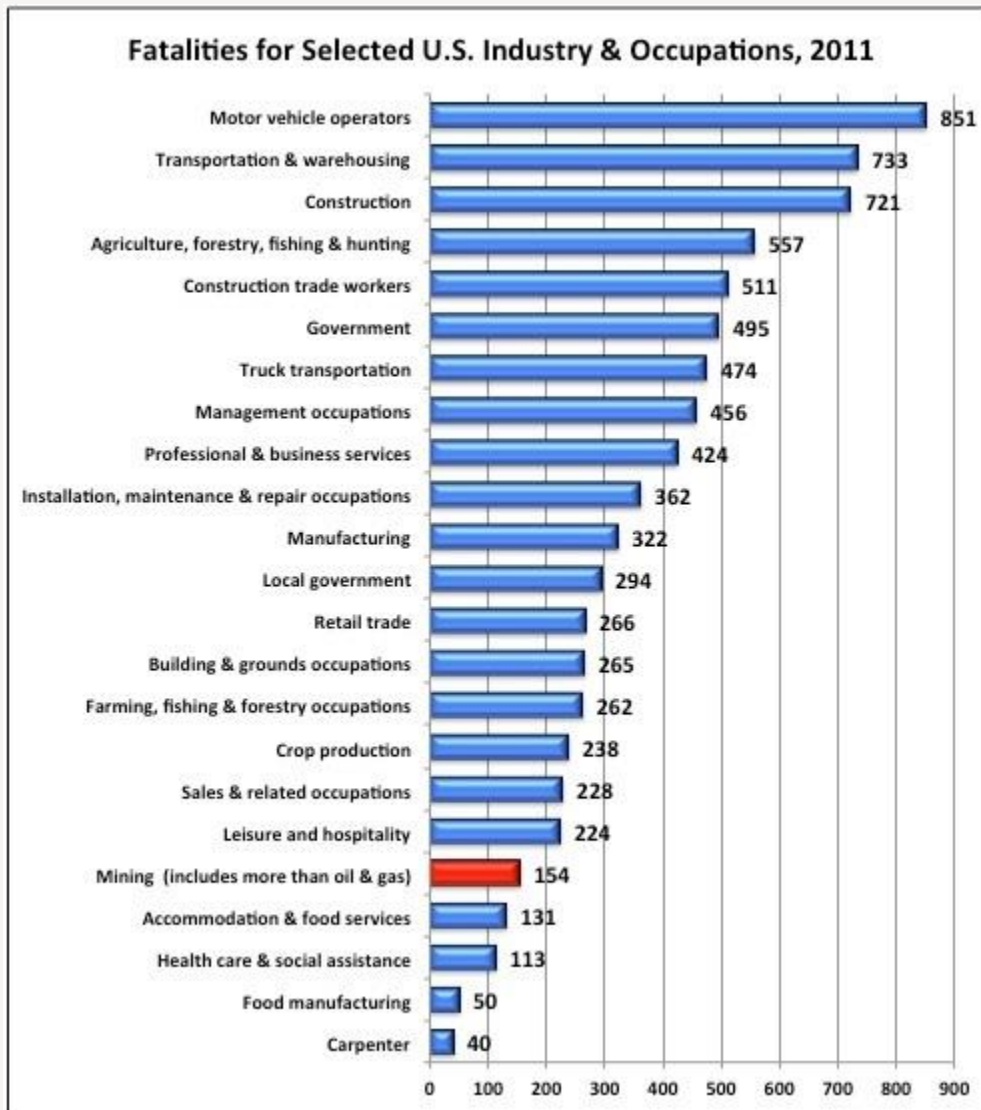
- fishing
- aircraft pilot or flight engineer
- steel workers
- farming and ranching
- truck drivers
- taxi or limousine drivers
- bartending
- waste management

Again, this isn't to say there is no risk involved in developing oil and gas resources. But this information does suggest the claim that wellpads are “among the most dangerous workplaces in the country” might be a little hyperbolic.

The 2011 National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries also lists the total number of fatalities, and notes that the [number of fatalities](#) from oil and natural gas development is exceeded by many other industries. Those include, but are not limited to:

Motor vehicle operators (851 deaths); Transportation and warehousing (733 deaths); Construction (721 deaths); Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (557 deaths); Construction trade workers (511 deaths); Government (495 deaths);

Truck transportation (474 deaths); Professional and business services (424 deaths); Installation, maintenance and repair occupations (362); Manufacturing (322 deaths); Local government (294 deaths); Retail trade (266 deaths); Building and grounds cleaning maintenance occupations (265); farming, fishing and forestry (262); Crop production (238 deaths); Leisure and hospitality (224 deaths); Sales and related occupations as a sector (228 deaths).



A review of additional federal statistics highlights the industry's commitment to safety, and also the progress that continues to be made. In fact, the number of injuries in the sector has been declining even as the industry has significantly increased its operations, which of course has resulted in [U.S. oil](#) and [natural gas production](#) reaching production levels that are exceeding or nearing historic highs.

Such an achievement doesn't come without a very targeted focus on ensuring the safety of worksites. Eric Esswein, a Senior Industrial Hygienist at the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH), made this very observation last year when he visited several areas undergoing shale development, concluding that the oil and natural gas industry "runs very, very safe work practices and sites."

Esswein's experience is backed by federal statistics. According to data [released by BLS late last year](#), injuries in the oil and natural gas industry declined in 2011 by an amazing 33 percent. The injury rate – 0.8 cases per 100 workers – is well below the national incidence rate of 3.5 cases per 100 workers. Having an incident rate so far below the national average doesn't happen by accident.

The oil and gas industry's number one priority is safety, for both its workers and the environment in which it operates. And it's a commitment that comes across in pretty vivid detail for those who take just a second to look at the actual facts.