



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Health and safety at work in Greece

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This report is available in electronic format only.

The findings of a 2005 study by the Labour Institute (INE) of the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE) and the Confederation of Public Servants (ADEDY) reveal significant problems in Greece as regards the implementation of legislation on health and safety at work. Risk prevention measures and safety and health practices are being ignored, while levels of monitoring are also inadequate. Moreover, many workers and managers are unaware of the relevant legislation, which is outdated and excessively complex in many cases. Infringement of normal working hours and illegal and/or legal overtime, as well as tight deadlines, have increased the levels of accidents in the workplace in recent years. The report recommends financial incentives and penalties, in addition to awareness-raising campaigns, to ensure greater compliance with health and safety legislation.

Context

In the autumn of 2005, the authority for monitoring the implementation of labour legislation in the Greek labour market, the Corps of Labour Inspectors (SEPE) ([GR0102100F](#)), published as part of its annual report a range of statistical data on the extent and characteristics of workplace accidents during the period between 2000 and 2005. These data refer to fatal and non-fatal accidents at work recorded and reported to SEPE, and include valuable information such as the following:

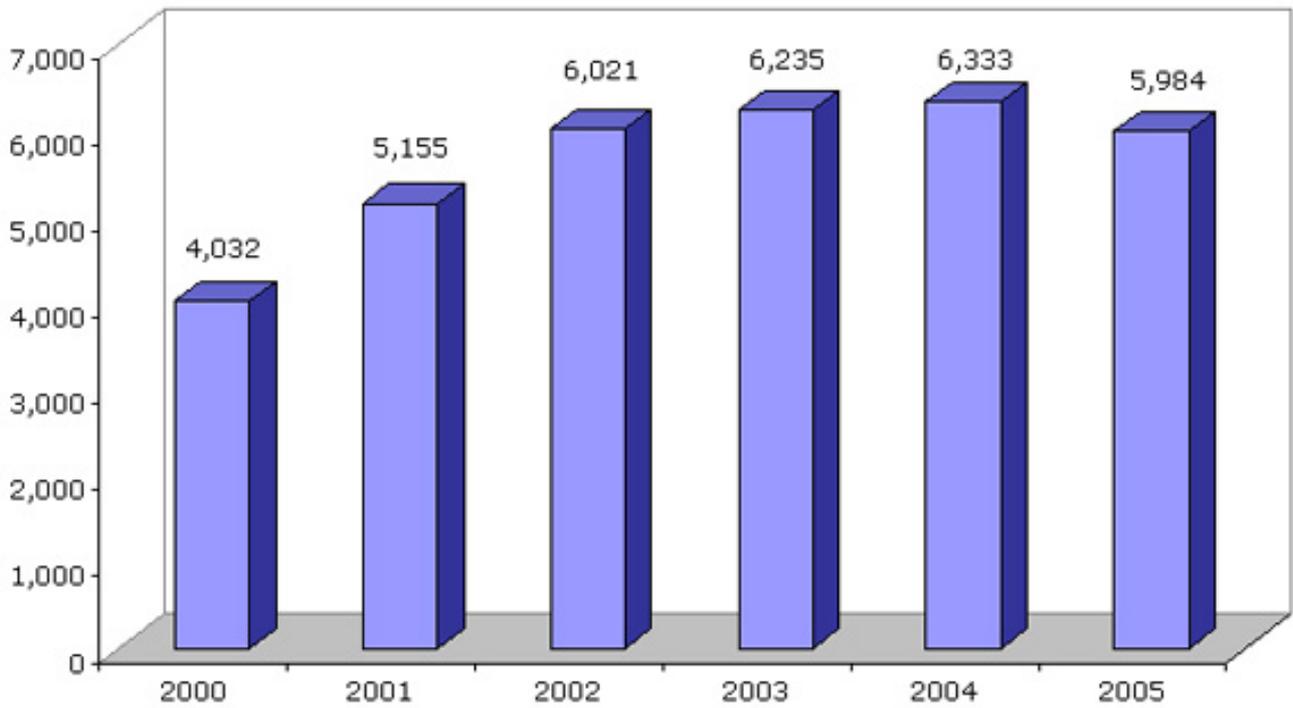
- regional distribution of workplace accidents;
- trends in fatal workplace accidents by sector;
- causes of fatal accidents in the construction industry.

In addition, the report makes reference to workplace accidents reported to the country's largest social insurance organisation, the Social Insurance Foundation (IKA), as well as trends in workplace accidents as a percentage of all people insured under IKA from 1977 to 2001. According to IKA data, the number of workplace accidents has been steadily decreasing. In particular, whereas in 1977 the percentage of workplace accidents was 3.81% of all insured, the 2001 figure approached levels of 0.85%, showing a sharp overall decline. This trend is closely associated with the reduction of people employed in the manufacturing sector, which is traditionally characterised by higher rates of work accidents.

Nevertheless, the downward trend in the risk of accidents at work was not only interrupted but reversed in the years that followed, according to SEPE records. In the 2000–2005 period, reported workplace accidents increased significantly; this increase was largely due to efforts to complete work for the Olympic Games within the prescribed deadlines ([GR0211103F](#), [GR0411104F](#)). As SEPE's most recent periodical report for the period from January 2006 to September 2006 emphasises: 'most of the checks were performed in the construction industry (engineering works and building), since it is common knowledge that these specific work activities show the highest index of workplace accidents in the whole country, with 20% of accidents and around 55% of fatal accidents'.

Figure 1 illustrates the upward trend in accidents at work in Greece from 2000 to the end of September 2005, while Figure 2 shows the number of fatal accidents.

Figure 1: Number of workplace accidents reported in Greece, 2000–2005*

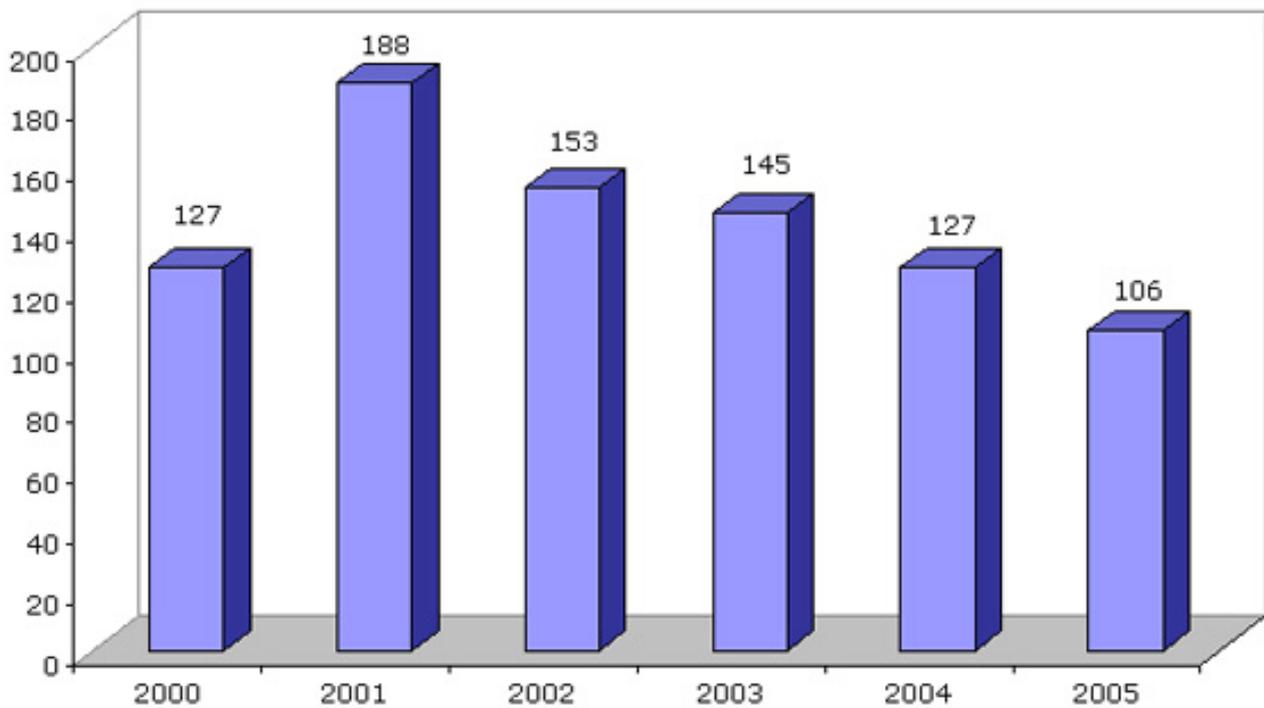


Note: *The number for 2005 is based on the first nine months of the year.

Source: SEPE annual reports, 2000–2005

Number of workplace accidents reported in Greece, 2000–2005

Figure 2: Trends in fatal workplace accidents, 2000–2005*



Note: *The number for 2005 is an estimation based on the first nine months of the year, when 80 fatal accidents

were recorded in the workplace.

Source: SEPE, 2000–2005

Trends in fatal workplace accidents, 2000–2005

About the study

In light of this, a 2005 study by the Labour Institute ([INE](#)) of the Greek General Confederation of Labour ([GSEE](#)) and the Confederation of Public Servants ([ADEDY](#)) aimed at evaluating the implementation of legislation on workplace health and safety in Greece. The analysis provides useful information and conclusions on the system for implementing and monitoring labour legislation to combat occupational risk. In other words, the report examined the effectiveness of existing labour legislation on the health and safety of the country's workers, by taking into account the available statistical data and the views of the people involved in health and safety matters. More specifically, the INE study includes the following sections:

- a review of the present situation in Europe as regards the issue of occupational risk and promotion of workers' health in Europe;
- a review and detailed description of the current statutory framework on workplace safety and health in Greece;
- a survey of employees and managers in companies in three sectors of economic activity, using a questionnaire focusing on health and safety issues;
- conclusions with regard to the current situation as well as proposals for reforming the system of labour legislation enforcement in respect of workplace health and safety in Greece.

Experts and researchers worked together to bring the study to completion, and in 2005 a summary of the research was presented in an article by Kostas Boukouvalas in the journal [Enimerosi](#). This report will now outline the methodology and main findings of the INE employee and manager survey.

Survey methodology

The survey analysis is based on the responses from employees and managers in companies to the questionnaire, which mainly contained multiple-choice questions and statements for grading or ranking. The questions referred primarily to the application and operation of various health and safety measures in the company, such as the presence of a medical doctor in the workplace. In parallel, other matters were also investigated, such as whether some written form of occupational risk assessment in the company existed, the extent of knowledge of labour legislation and whether recorded data were kept on health and safety matters in the company.

Furthermore, the questionnaire also contained open questions giving the respondents the opportunity for further justification and comments. The employees' suggestions were thus taken into account in order to improve the existing legislative, statutory and monitoring framework.

The specific sample was limited to the following sectors of economic activity, covering respondents in a broad geographical area:

- construction sector;
- manufacturing sector;
- companies falling within the broader public sector.

This selection was based on the findings of an international literature review to identify the sectors that show the highest frequency and severity indices of recorded workplace accidents. In all, the survey comprised a total of 324 completed questionnaires, which were distributed as follows:

- engineering companies in construction – 30%;
- manufacturing – 33%;
- broader public sector – 37%.

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to occupation.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents, by occupation

	Number of people
Engineers with university education, safety engineers	142
Supervisors with technical education	104
Technicians, managers	66
Onsite doctors and nurses	10
Health and safety committee members	2
Total	324

Source: Boukouvalas, 2005

The authors of the INE study acknowledge that the survey sample is insufficient for drawing conclusions pertaining to all companies in each economic sector being investigated. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in Greece no relevant research has been conducted thus far, and as a result the scale of occupational risk and workplace accidents remains unknown. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of records of occupational illnesses maintained by the competent insurance and supervisory organisations. In Greece, no system is in operation regarding the notification and recording of occupational illnesses by competent healthcare institutions – such as hospitals, or study and therapy centres – or by specialised doctors.

However, IKA made an initial attempt to broach the matter of recording occupational illness in 2003. The social insurance fund collected data from the pension files of the people it insures, in cooperation with the Occupational Illness Committees that work with IKA to grant pensions, and IKA's Centre for Diagnosis and Occupational Medicine. Unfortunately, the results of the annual reports could be described as rather meagre, since only 39 cases of occupational illness were recorded in 2003, 32 cases in 2004 and 30 in 2005 ([GR0611019Q](#)).

Research findings

The INE study highlights important findings regarding the implementation of existing labour legislation on workplace health and safety in Greece and the operation of the relevant institutions. Based on existing provisions, these practices consist of establishing the presence of the following functions and procedures in the workplace:

- safety officer;
- occupational doctor;
- workplace health and safety committee;
- a written occupational risk assessment.

The survey revealed a failure to implement the above practices on a broad scale. In particular, there are no safety officers or occupational doctors in a large proportion of companies, despite the fact that these posts were enacted into law almost two decades ago. More specifically, 36% and 49% of respondents stated that these positions are not filled in the company where they work, or that they do not know whether they are filled (Table 2).

Table 2: Presence of safety officer/occupational doctor at workplace (%)

	Safety officer
Yes	64.2
No	27.5
Don't know	8.3

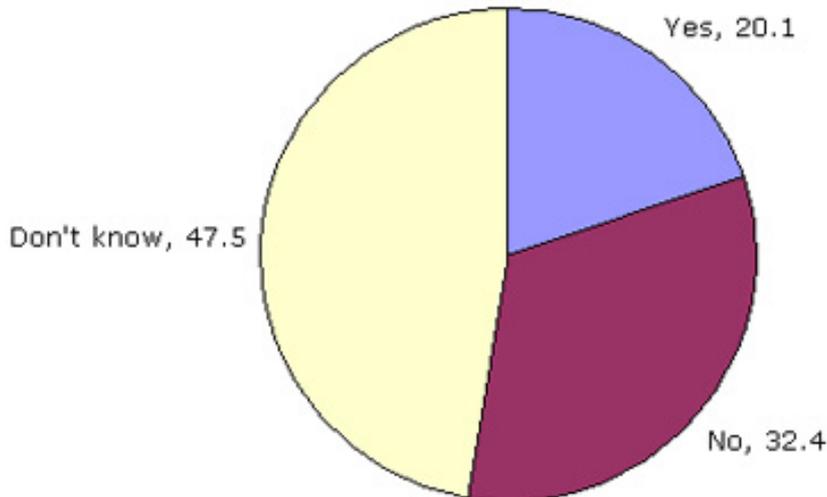
Total	100
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Source: Boukouvalas, 2005

These discrepancies in the observance of the statutory framework on health and safety are also confirmed by the vague picture that emerges from the responses regarding the employment status of safety officers and occupational doctors. About 64.5% and 66.3% of the employees and managers surveyed do not know on what terms and conditions safety officers and occupational doctors are employed in their company, that is, whether they work only for that company, whether they are external contractors or whether they fulfil their duties in parallel with other jobs.

The situation is similar regarding the case of workplace health and safety committees, which are required at any company employing more than 50 employees (Figure 3). Only 32% of the respondents stated that this committee exists in practice in their workplace, and about two in three respondents (68%) reported that it does not exist or that they did not know whether it did.

Figure 3: Presence of health and safety committee at workplace (%)



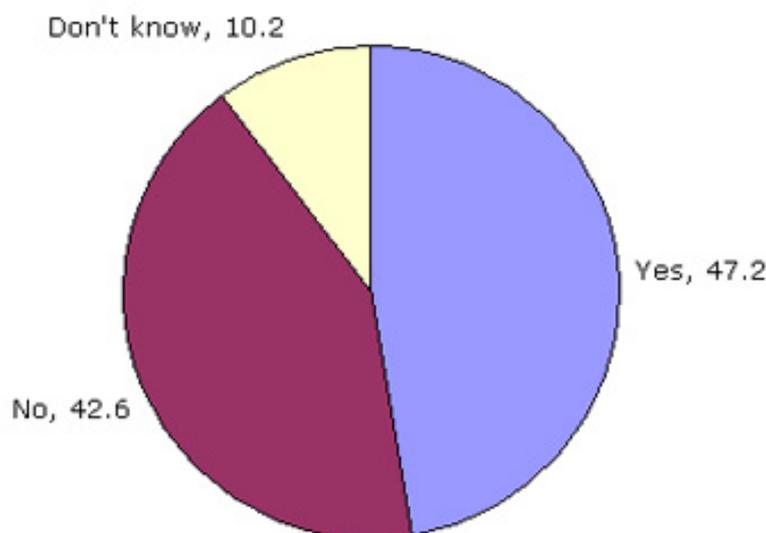
Source: Boukouvalas, 2005

Presence of health and safety committee at workplace (%)

With regard to the written occupational risk assessment, which is a statutory obligation of the company, the study revealed that only 47.2% of the survey sample knew of such an assessment (Figure 4). This finding corroborates the answers to specific questions relating to the risk assessment, such as whether measurements are taken of harmful substances in the workplace and whether workers receive medical examinations. Only 21% and 26% responded that medical examinations and measurements of harmful substances had taken place, respectively.

Furthermore, only about a half of the respondents answered yes to the question on whether a manual was available containing advice and guidelines from the safety officer and occupational doctor. At the same time, just 46% of those surveyed gave an affirmative response to a similar question on whether the prescribed record of occupational accidents was kept.

Figure 4: Existence of risk assessment regarding health and safety hazards at workplace (%)



Source: Boukouvalas, 2005

Existence of risk assessment regarding health and safety hazards at workplace (%)

Hence, it is not surprising that 50% of the workers and managers in the companies included in the research sample believed the labour legislation to be incomplete or somewhat incomplete as regards their employment. Taken in conjunction with the survey responses on the strength of the legislation, the data lead to the conclusion that most workers believe the legislative framework to be comprehensive but simply ineffective in its implementation. The high percentage of respondents (42.6%–59.3%) who did not answer the above questions is also striking; this probably has to do with a poor knowledge on their part of the labour legislation. Overall, the majority (66.9%–79.9%) answered that they had little or no knowledge of the basic labour legislation, while a minority (20.1%–33.1%) responded that they had good or very good knowledge in this regard.

In relation to differences between sectors, the study revealed that, compared with the other two sectors investigated, the broader public sector reported significant deficits in the area of health and safety. This view emerged from the following findings in the broader public sector:

- 64% of respondents answered that the position of occupational doctor was not implemented;
- 66% of respondents reported that no written occupational risk assessment existed.

Key conclusions of study

The INE study reached some interesting conclusions, which leave little room for complacency in the context of combating occupational risk and promoting workers' health in Greece. The conclusions were also drawn from processing the answers to the survey's open questions, which provided important qualitative observations. The following points are some of the study's key conclusions:

- the existing legislation contains a number of old, outdated provisions which, in conjunction with the different form of present-day laws, have caused great confusion among employers and workers, mainly among middle management, which is usually charged with meeting the requirements of the legislation;
- the relatively large number of laws and the complex legislation that have emerged in recent years make it

necessary to specify which legislative rules should be applied to any specific case;

- many respondents are of the opinion that there is inadequate monitoring of implementation by the competent state authorities and/or selective implementation of the legislation in some economic sectors, resulting in poor cooperation between companies, worker representatives and the relevant authorities;
- the infringement of normal working hours and illegal and/or legal overtime help to increase workplace accidents, and fear of dismissals prevent workers from demanding safe working conditions;
- pressing time constraints and stringent timetables for engineering and construction work have caused safety measures to be considered of secondary importance;
- almost all respondents believed that an organised campaign should be launched to build awareness and provide information to workers and the public at large on the value of preventing occupational risk in the workplace.

Finally, the study suggests financial incentives, both positive and negative, as an important means for improving workplace safety and health. Such incentives would include the establishment of an occupational risk insurance scheme, linking safety and health measures within a company to the amount of insurance premiums, thus giving meaningful financial incentives for the prevention of occupational risk ([GR0506103F](#)).

Commentary

The INE study is of interest because it sheds light on the problem of non-observance and non-implementation of labour legislation pertaining to workplace health and safety in Greece. Typical examples of this situation are the inertia surrounding all safety and health practices, the fact that the relevant legislation is ignored or is unfamiliar, and the confusion among the people involved, which is caused by the existence of too many laws.

This disappointing situation may be overcome by strengthening the mechanisms for monitoring and supervising the implementation of labour legislation; by expanding the mechanisms for dialogue between the social partners; and by reinforcing the processes of providing information and building awareness among workers, companies and all institutions involved in preventing occupational risk in the workplace.

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