Abstract

Jamaica has a total population of 2,599,334 (STATIN, 2001) producing an average of 945,496 tonnes of municipal solid waste on an annual basis. Of this, the National Solid Waste Management Authority (NSWMA) collects and processes 680,756 tonnes yearly. Waste is more than often un-separated, exposing collection crews and disposal site staff to a wide range of occupational risks. This paper provides an overview of the two-year research currently being undertaken by the NSWMA to document and quantify the hazards faced by workers in the waste industry. The research has as its objectives to examine the historical background to the problem, Government and or the NSWMA's policy development strategy for occupational health and safety, the specific injuries related to the industry and subsequently to develop a major database on health and safety in the sector to include information on workers compensation, rate and nature of injury among others.

The paper will also seek to summarize recommendations based on the preliminary findings to reduce risks to sanitation workers, including: suggestions for a public awareness program; ergonomics guidelines for bending and lifting and or reaching; heat stress guidelines; job rotation; equipment design and regulations.

Sanitation workers are exposed to a variety of hazards and risks, including safety, physical, chemical, ergonomic and biological hazards. Studies conducted in Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, and Denmark indicate that workers engaged in curbside collection or processing of secondary materials are at risk for injuries or illness such as musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) from repetitive motions such as sorting and lifting, bronchitis and asthma from exposure to dusts in composting and processing, and injuries from broken glass and other sharp materials present in household solid waste. Some provincial and U.S. jurisdictions have developed or are currently developing standards and regulations to assist in hazard prevention and control.

Due to the nature of the industry, Jamaican workers are exposed to more risks primarily because of little or no regulations for occupational safety, improper residential disposal, carelessly passing motorists and collection vehicle design.