



Hearing Loss Research at NIOSH: Reviews of Research Programs of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

Committee to Review the NIOSH Hearing Loss Research Program, Board on Health Sciences Policy, Institute of Medicine, National Research Council

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The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) was established by the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (U.S. Congress, 1970). Today the agency is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIOSH is charged with the responsibility to "conduct . . . research, experiments, and demonstrations relating to occupational safety and health" and to develop "innovative methods, techniques, and approaches for dealing with [those] problems" (U.S. Congress, 1970). Its research targets include identifying criteria for use in setting worker exposure standards and exploring new problems that may arise in the workplace. Prevention of occupational hearing loss has been part of the NIOSH research portfolio from the time the agency was established. A principal cause of occupational hearing loss is the cumulative effect of years of exposure to hazardous noise. Exposure to certain chemicals with or without concomitant noise exposure may also contribute to occupational hearing loss. Hearing loss may impede communication in the workplace and contribute to safety hazards. Occupationally acquired hearing loss may also have an adverse effect on workers' lives beyond the workplace. No medical means are currently available to prevent or reverse it, although hearing aids are widely used and research on other treatments is ongoing. Occupational hearing loss is a serious concern, although the number of workers affected is uncertain.

In September 2004, NIOSH requested that the National Academies conduct reviews of as many as 15 NIOSH programs with respect to the impact and relevance of their work in reducing workplace injury and illness and to identify future directions that their work might take. The Hearing Loss Research Program was selected by NIOSH as one of the first two programs to be reviewed.

Hearing Loss Research at NIOSH examines the following issues for the Hearing Loss Research Program: (1) Progress in reducing workplace illness and injuries through occupational safety and health research, assessed on the basis of an analysis of relevant data about workplace illnesses and injuries and an evaluation of the effect that NIOSH research has had in reducing illness and injuries, (2) Progress in targeting new research to the areas of occupational safety and health most relevant to future improvements in workplace protection, and (3) Significant emerging research areas that appear especially important in terms of their relevance to the mission of NIOSH.

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