**Absent workers cost Canada’s economy $16.6 billion**



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Reuters - Office workers are seen at Southern Cross train station in Melbourne May 10, 2010. REUTERS/Mick Tsikas

Public sector workers in larger organizations are missing work more often than private sector staff in smaller firms, but overall the lost days are costing the country more than [$16 billion in lost productivity, a new report shows](http://ca.finance.yahoo.com/news/absent-workers-cost-canadian-economy-130000321.html).

[The Conference Board of Canada says](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/press/newsrelease/13-09-23/absent_workers_cost_the_canadian_economy_billions.aspx) the average Canadian worker was absent 9.3 days in 2011 – that’s nearly two full work weeks – due to illnesses or longer term leaves of absence.

If the number seems extraordinarily high - it is, especially compared to the United States and the United Kingdom, where absenteeism rates are said to be about five and seven days per employee.

But before you go blaming Canada’s [paltry vacation allotment](http://ca.finance.yahoo.com/blogs/insight/canada-u-global-laggards-worker-time-off-164645852.html) compared to our friends in Europe, recall that the U.S. doesn’t even guarantee paid time off for workers.

Maybe it’s the long, cold winters that make us sick more often, or the late nights watching our hockey teams not win the Stanley Cup. It's more likely the increased stress in our lives as a result of longer hours at work and increased responsibilities at home.

The report comes days after Statistics Canada’s National Household Survey reflected on the pressures of the more than 8 million caregivers in Canada, many of whom report having to miss work to handle their at-home obligations.

Stats Can also said more than 2 million Canadians are part of the [“sandwich generation,”](http://ca.finance.yahoo.com/blogs/pay-day-/canada-sandwich-generation-financially-strapped-153353957.html) which means[taking care of both young children and aging parents at the same time](http://ca.finance.yahoo.com/blogs/pay-day-/canada-sandwich-generation-financially-strapped-153353957.html).

The Conference Board says absenteeism is a problem that needs to be addressed. It suggests employers do a better job tracking how often people aren’t coming in, and why, to better address the issue.

“Unless organizations start proactively addressing absenteeism, this trend will most likely accelerate as the workforce ages," said report author Nicole Stewart.

The Conference Board survey, which included Stats Can data and its own survey of about 400 medium-and-large size companies, says absenteeism rates were highest in the health care and social assistance industries. In both sectors, employees work long shifts and are in regular contact with the sick, conditions that can increase stress and lead to illness or leaves of absence.

The report also notes that the public sector absenteeism rate was highest at 12.9 days compared to 8.2 days in the private sector. For unionized workers, the absenteeism rate was 13.2 days, compared to 7.5 days for those not in a union.

Women were also absent more often than men, or about 11.4 days versus 7.7 days, according to the report.

The organizations surveyed by the Conference Board estimated the direct cost of absenteeism averaged 2.4 per cent of gross annual payroll, which the Conference Board then translated to a loss of $16.6 billion in 2012.

The Conference Board says 46 per cent of companies tracked absenteeism by dates in 2012, up from 40 per cent in its 2009 survey. Still, only 15 per cent tracked the cost of absent workers, which is similar to 2009.

The report is the first in a three-part series the Conference Board says will address disability management programs for employers.