Real wages represent only one aspect of the employment contract. Another aspect is working conditions, especially the safety of the environment. An extreme measure of safety is fatalities on the job. These have fallen inexorably since 1965, so that the chance of dying on the job is now only one-fifth of what it was a generation ago.

The number of total workplace fatalities is very low (4 per 100,000 workers in 1995). This is less than the rate of deaths from accidental falls (5.1) and is much smaller than the death rates from accidents or violence (57.3) when measured for the entire population during both working and nonworking hours. The workplace of today clearly is a safer place when measured by fatalities.

The composition of fatalities has also changed, partly because of shifts in the composition of the labor force. Forestry and fishing remain very dangerous occupations, but they employ less of the workforce, so that accidents associated with them (being struck by an object or drowning) are now a small proportion of total workplace deaths. In spite of their prominence on television newscasts, fires and explosions cause only a minor fraction of deaths. Even without the occupational shifts, data from dangerous occupations such as mining, when available, indicate a decline in fatality rates. Now, the top two causes of workplace deaths are transportation accidents and homicides, by a fairly large margin.