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EXPLORING SOCIAL CONTEXTS AT WORK AND HOW THEY AFFECT THE SAFETY OF YOUNG CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

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Background The role of the social context is becoming more widely examined in workplace safety studies. We explored two aspects of the social environment of teens employed in construction. The presence of a family-firm connection (a youth works with or for a family member) and work group size (the total number of workers on a job site), believed to be inversely related to greater interpersonal contact with co-workers, were investigated for their potential impacts on working conditions including use of hazardous equipment, assignment of dangerous tasks, use of personal protective equipment, supervision and safety training.

Methods Survey data from 187 teenage construction workers (14–17) in North Carolina, USA, were used to explore whether these aspects of the social environment affect youths' hazard exposures and safety practices. Cross-tabulations and χ^2 statistics were used to measure associations between work group size (≤ 10 vs 11–50 workers on the job site) and family-firm connections (yes/no) and hazard exposures and safety practices.

Results Having a family-firm connection was associated with fewer hazard exposures and greater safety practices. Youth who worked on job sites with a larger work group (11–50 workers) reported greater hazard exposure but also greater safety practices.

Conclusions Our findings suggest that family-firm connections may have a protective effect for youth in construction. While there are limits to the significance of some of our findings with respect to work group size, the patterns found indicate that further research in this area is warranted.