



MOST FREQUENTLY CITED OSHA EXCAVATION VIOLATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Excavation and trenching work continue to rank among the most hazardous activities in the construction industry. OSHA's excavation standard (29 CFR 1926 Subpart P) is designed to address life-threatening risks such as cave-ins, hazardous atmospheres, and falling loads. Despite clear regulatory requirements, enforcement data over the past five years shows a consistent pattern of recurring violations, many of which involve basic safety practices.

The persistence of these violations is especially concerning given that trench collapses are among the leading causes of fatalities in excavation work. OSHA and industry studies repeatedly confirm that most incidents are preventable through proper planning, training, and adherence to established safety controls.

OVERVIEW OF OSHA EXCAVATION STANDARDS

OSHA Subpart P governs all excavation activities, including trenches, which are defined as narrow excavations deeper than they are wide. The standard applies universally to construction employers and includes requirements for soil classification, protective systems, access and egress, inspections, and hazard control.

Central to these regulations is the requirement that a "competent person" be present to identify hazards and be authorized to take corrective action, along with mandatory protective systems for trenches five feet or deeper.

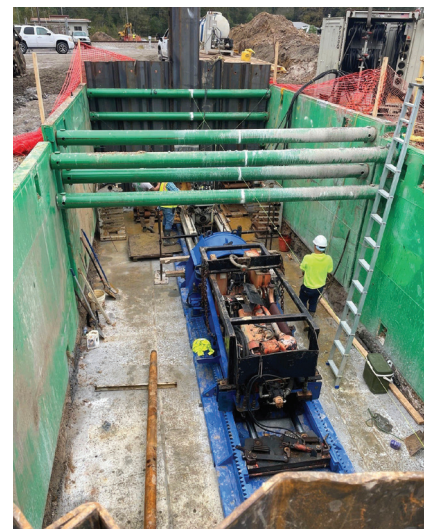
MOST FREQUENTLY CITED EXCAVATION VIOLATIONS

1. Failure to Provide Protective Systems

The most cited excavation violation—and the leading cause of fatalities—is the failure to provide appropriate cave-in protection. Protective systems include sloping, benching, shoring, or shielding.

Recent enforcement data indicates that a lack of protective systems accounts for the largest share of excavation citations and carries the highest financial penalties. It represented over 40% of excavation-related penalty totals in 2025 data.

Time pressure, cost concerns, or underestimation of soil instability are all reasons why this requirement may be bypassed. However, trench walls can collapse in seconds, with soil weighing thousands of pounds per cubic yard, making survival unlikely without protection.



The method of protecting workers in an excavation must be matched to the hazards that are present.

2. Inadequate Access and Egress

OSHA requires safe means of entering and exiting trenches, such as ladders, steps, or ramps, located within 25 unobstructed feet of workers.

Violations frequently occur when ladders are missing or improperly spaced, access points are obstructed, or workers must climb unstable trench walls to egress the excavation. This violation significantly increases the risk of injury during emergencies, particularly cave-ins or flooding situations.



Adequate access and egress also includes access to the edge of the trench where the protective system is removed from the edge.

3. Lack of a Competent Person and Inspections

OSHA requires a trained “competent person” to classify soil conditions, inspect excavations daily and after weather events, identify hazards, and implement corrective actions.

Failure to designate or use a competent person is a major recurring violation. This issue often stems from inadequate training or lack of understanding of the role’s importance. Without competent oversight, other violations—such as improper protective systems—are more likely to occur.

4. Improper Spoil Placement

Excavated material (spoil) must be placed at least two feet from the edge of the trench or secured to prevent collapse.

Common violations include spoil piles placed directly at trench edges, equipment operating too close to excavation walls, and lack of retaining devices. Improper spoil placement increases surcharge loads on trench walls, greatly raising the risk of collapse.

5. Failure to Protect Against Hazardous Atmospheres

Excavations, especially deeper ones or those near utilities, may contain hazardous atmospheres such as low oxygen levels, toxic gases, and flammable vapors. OSHA requires testing and protective measures where such hazards may exist. Although less frequent than other violations, atmospheric hazard violations often result in higher penalties due to their severity and potential for fatal outcomes.

6. Failure to Locate and Protect Underground Utilities

Before excavation begins, employers must identify and mark underground installations such as gas, electricity, water, and communication lines.

Frequent violations involve failure to call utility location services, inadequate marking or verification, and unsafe excavation near known utilities. These violations not only endanger workers but can also result in major infrastructure damage and service disruptions.

TRENDS OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Analysis of OSHA enforcement data from 2021 to 2026 reveals several key trends:

- **Consistency in violations:** The same core issues—protective systems, access/egress, and competent person requirements—remain dominant year after year.
- **Preventable nature:** Most violations involve well-established safety practices rather than complex regulatory requirements.
- **High fatality correlation:** Many citations are directly linked to fatal incidents, particularly cave-ins.

- **Increased penalties:** OSHA has increased enforcement efforts and penalties, particularly for repeat or willful violations.

These trends suggest that the issue is less about regulatory complexity and more about compliance culture and execution in the field.

ROOT CAUSES OF RECURRING VIOLATIONS

Several underlying factors would appear to contribute to the persistence of excavation violations:

- **Time and cost pressures:** Contractors may bypass safety measures to maintain schedules or reduce costs.
- **Inadequate training:** Workers and supervisors may lack knowledge of OSHA requirements.
- **Complacency:** Experienced crews may underestimate the risks in routine excavations.
- **Poor supervision:** Absence of competent oversight leads to multiple violations simultaneously.

Importantly, many fatal trench collapses occur in smaller projects, where safety controls are often less strictly enforced.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

To reduce excavation-related violations and improve safety performance, organizations should focus on:

1. **Strict enforcement of protective systems** for all trenches five feet or deeper.
2. **Comprehensive training programs** for workers and competent persons.
3. **Daily inspections and documentation** of trench conditions.
4. **Proper planning**, including utility locations and hazard assessments.
5. **Clear accountability**, ensuring supervisors enforce compliance.

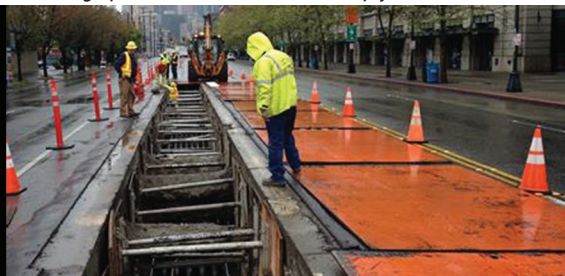
Proactive safety management not only prevents citations but significantly reduces the risk of serious injuries and fatalities.

CONCLUSION

The most frequently cited OSHA excavation violations over the past five years highlight a critical reality: most trenching hazards are well understood and entirely preventable. Failures to implement basic safety measures—such as protective systems, proper access, and competent supervision—continue to put workers at risk.

For organizations engaged in excavation work, addressing these recurring violations should be a top priority. By focusing on compliance with OSHA Subpart P and fostering a strong safety culture, employers can dramatically reduce both regulatory exposure and the likelihood of catastrophic incidents.

Disclaimer: This document does not provide or address all information, laws, standards, regulations, codes, requirements, and safety procedures applicable to excavations, trench protection, and shoring options. Readers should comply with all such measures.



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