

SECTORAL ACTIVITIES PROGRAMME

Working Paper

Violence and stress at work in the postal sector

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to stimulate discussion and comment

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Preface

The ILO's Sectoral Activities Department commissioned this Working Paper in preparation for a Meeting of experts to be held from 8 to 15 October 2003 in Geneva, which is intended to consider and review a draft and to adopt a Code of practice on Violence and stress at work in services sectors: A threat to productivity and decent work. That Meeting is part of the continuing work of the Department on 22 sectors of economic activity, of which the postal and other communications sector is one. Sectoral Working Papers have been or are being prepared on a number of other sectors and subsectors as well as the postal sector, in relation to violence and stress. These include the following draft papers, which may be published in 2003: Bert Essenberg: *Violence and stress in the transport sector* (Geneva, ILO, forthcoming); Sabir Giga, Helge Hoel and Cary L. Cooper: *Violence and stress at work in financial services* (Geneva, ILO, forthcoming); Helge Hoel and Sabir Giga: *Violence and stress in the hotel and catering sector* (Geneva, ILO, forthcoming); Sabir Giga, Helge Hoel and Cary L. Cooper: *Violence and stress at work in the performing arts and in journalism* (Geneva, ILO, forthcoming); Richard Verdugo: *Workplace violence in the education sector: Issues, solutions and resources* (Geneva, ILO, forthcoming); and Benjamin Paty, Dominique Lassarre and Anne Jolly: *Violence et stress au travail dans le secteur de l'éducation* (Geneva, ILO, forthcoming). Other papers have already been published, as follows: V. Di Martino: *Workplace violence in the health sector – Country case studies: Brazil, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Portugal, South Africa, Thailand, plus additional Australian study: Synthesis Report* (Geneva, ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI Joint Programme, 2002); V. Di Martino: *Relationship of work stress and workplace violence in the health sector* (Geneva, ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI Joint Programme on Workplace Violence in the Health Sector Working Paper, 2003); J. Richards: *Management of workplace violence victims* (Geneva, ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI Joint Programme Working Paper, 2003); and ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI: *Framework guidelines for addressing workplace violence in the health sector* (Geneva, 2002).

It is hoped that this study can help to promote action to tackle violence and stress in postal sector workplaces, and complement work being carried out by the ILO and other organizations at various levels to assist in reducing or eliminating stress and violence at workplaces in services sectors around the world.

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Acknowledgements

Research on work-related violence and stress that attempt to concentrate on specific issues may have significant implications for many workers, not least for those who work within the postal sector. Therefore, in collaboration with the ILO, we have endeavoured to present a general picture of postal services worldwide and working conditions within them as a background to the violence and stress that may be found there.

The subject matter has been researched with guidance from a number of researchers and practitioners whose contributions make this report more complete. In particular, we would like to thank David Beale (UMIST), Christiane Wiskow (international consultant) and John Myers (ILO) for their efforts in supporting this study.

1. Introduction

Work-related stress is both a cause and effect of workplace violence (Cahill and Landsbergis, 1996), and can affect individuals when they feel an inability to cope or control demands placed on them within their work environment, eventually contributing to the development of health conditions such as depression, anxiety, nervousness, fatigue and heart disorder (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002).

Workplace violence can be considered both in terms of physical and psychological aggression and is defined by the European Commission as “incidents where persons are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an implicit or explicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health” (Wynne, Clarkin, Cox and Griffiths, 1997). This definition implies that the perpetrator responsible for causing a violent incident in the workplace can be either a person who is familiar to the victim, for example a co-worker or customer, or a complete stranger.

The interrelated issues of violence and stress in the workplace have attained greater prominence over the past few years, as witness an ever-increasing effort on behalf of key international bodies such as the ILO to advance our understanding of the main causes and effects of the phenomena.

The increasing frequency of reported acts of violence in the workplace, in most industrialized and developing countries, illustrates that these problems are not confined to any specific geographical area. Previous research indicates that nearly a third of the working population in developed countries report to high or very high levels of stress (Hoel, Sparks and Cooper, 2001). Similar evidence is presented from research conducted in newly industrializing countries.

Closer scrutiny of violence and stress research, particularly examination of cross-sectional data from different occupational groups and longitudinal national statistics indicate that some occupational groups are at greater risk than others (Paoli and Merllié, 2001). One occupational group that has been identified as a “high risk” occupation for exposure to violence and stress is postal workers (Vahtera and Pentti, 1999). Indeed, in the United States the term “going postal” has become synonymous with severe acts of workplace violence such as homicide (American Postal Workers’ Union, 2001). However, less severe and therefore sometimes more inconspicuous acts of violence, such as threats and psychological abuse, occur far more frequently. With respect to victims of severe acts of violence and their families, covert acts merit as serious attention as extreme acts of violence because the consequences in the long-term can be equally tragic for victims and their families (Baron and Neuman, 1996; Rogers and Kelloway, 1997).

Because recent research highlights the need to recognize and deal with violence and stress issues more specifically at a situational level (Sparks and Cooper, 1999; Di Martino, Hoel and Cooper, 2002; Giga, Faragher and Cooper, 2002), the purpose of this report is to review literature on the prevalence, causes and consequences of violence and stress within the postal sector, and to present good practice examples and relevant sources of information to guide practitioners and researchers.

Postal service providers, as discussed in this report, have historically benefited from financial and legislative support from their governments and have traditionally operated in non-competitive, monopolistic, highly unionized environments intended to provide a social service without any obligation for long-term financial viability. Globalization, deregulation, new technology and changing customer needs have demanded major changes not only to the products and services that these organizations provide, but also more

fundamentally to the way they function. These unremitting changes over the past couple of decades have strained relationships between managers, employees and employee representatives and have given rise to job insecurity, dissatisfaction and conflict among the workforce.

2. Sector-specific environment as originator of violence and stress at work

Claims of chronic mismanagement (Union Network International, 2002) and generally poor working conditions, along with the impact of sudden technological and organizational change, are argued to have facilitated the establishment and development of a form of social disorder within the postal sector (Baxter and Margavio, 1996), and an increase in the number of reported incidents of work-related stress (see table 1).

Table 1. Main causes of stress among postal workers, United Kingdom, 2001

Causes of stress	Percentage
Bad management	44
Too much workload	42
Staff shortages	20
Job insecurity	17
Monotonous work	16
Long hours	13
Bullying	11
Lack of control over work	11
Percentage of workers who rate item as one of the top two causes of stress	

Source: Communication Workers' Union, 2001.

Data from the Communication Workers' Union (see table 1), the main representative of postal workers in the United Kingdom, are indicative of the extent to which poor management and excessive workloads exert pressure on employees working in the sector.

2.1. A traditionally male-dominated workforce

The postal sector in many countries has traditionally been a male-dominated work environment, and in some cases was exclusively staffed by men. Globally, higher female participation in the postal workforce may be seen as a threat to the previous status quo, which can give rise to sexual harassment and individuals being victimized on gender grounds. Moreover, there is evidence of some male workers blaming their female colleagues for changes in working practices such as the introduction of flexible working initiatives and loss of overtime (Atkinson, 1998). This male resentment may be expressed in terms of sexist and crude behaviour towards their female colleagues, the consequences of which affect among other things the victim's well-being, intention to leave and job satisfaction (Barling, Dekker, Loughlin, Kelloway, Fullagar and Johnson, 1996). However, there are several countries in which a male-dominated workforce is a thing of the past, especially Estonia and Poland, but also Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, Portugal, South Africa and many others.

2.2. Intolerance and prejudice

Postal services have tended to have greater representation of ethnic minorities in the workplace, and cases of racial abuse and harassment by colleagues, customers and people in the community are reported from several countries – intolerant individuals either directly making slurs and derogatory remarks to targets, or by excluding the target from

work-related activity because of their ethnicity (Schneider, Hitlan and Radhakrishnan, 2000). Similarly, traditionally highly male-dominated work environments such as the postal, armed and civil services have remained bastions for homophobic attitudes. Intolerance in the postal sector still persists (Britten, 2002) and needs to be challenged in order to promote a secure, prejudice-free working environment for all workers regardless of their gender, race, sexual inclination or disability.

Postal services worldwide are witnessing unremitting and fundamental changes not only to the way they conduct their operations but also to the products and services they offer. Individual countries have adopted different models for change (see table 2 below).

Table 2. Five models for postal reform

Model name	Countries/bodies adopting model	Description
The Mercantilist Model	Germany, Netherlands	Full state support for postal organization to become world leader in communication
The Market Approach	Finland, Sweden, New Zealand	Postal organization must compete in marketplace and become profitable without state support
The National or Public Model	Canada, France, United States	Government involvement in national postal services
The Hybrid or Transitional Model	Australia, United Kingdom	Postal service providers subject to deregulation but not competing in a completely free market
Transnational Model	European Union, Universal Postal Union, World Bank	Intersection of international policy decisions and development projects of international agencies at the national level to reform postal organizations, through cooperation <i>and</i> competition

Source: Campbell, 2002, as quoted in Union Postale, July-Sep. 2002, p. 8.

Varying degrees of support from governments have a major impact on pressures exerted on some managers who are required to produce results under difficult circumstances. Moreover, the situation leads to more demands being placed on the workforce, and to reports of bad management and poor working conditions.

The stimulus behind this change process includes: globalization and deregulation resulting in increasing competition; technological advancement introducing new and more efficient forms of communication; and changing customer expectations that now demand a broader range of products and services (World Bank, 2002).

2.3. Globalization and deregulation

With globalization forcing most countries to liberalize businesses, some former state-run monopolies from the postal sector are facing competitive pressures for the first time because of the entrance into the marketplace of private mail and parcel service providers. The competitive edge of the new entrants, due in certain circumstances to their less restrictive working practices, lower unionization and efforts to concentrate specifically on more profitable products and services, for example by concentrating on more lucrative urban areas (ILO-UPU, 2000), has led to a handful of private organizations becoming dominant players in the global postal market.

Competitive pressures, rising levels of job insecurity caused by consolidation and globalization, and the implementation of performance systems have resulted in the sector experiencing frequent tensions between management and trade union representatives (Hoel, 2002; ILO, 2002), and reports of low morale and a dissatisfied workforce (Cahill and Landsbergis, 1996).

2.4. Technological advancement

The introduction of new and more efficient forms of communication such as the internet/electronic mail, facsimile and electronic data interchange, are threatening the dominance of more traditional forms of communicating, such as postal mail. However, in industrialized countries mail volumes continue to rise steadily despite these competitive pressures (see table 3). The pace of change is very much dependent on individual access to technology and the costs associated with using new methods as compared to conventional postal methods.

Table 3. Mail volumes from selected countries for 1996-99

Country	Items per resident per annum			
	1996	1997	1998	1999
Bangladesh	2.0	4.3	4.4	n.a.
China	6.4	5.5	5.2	4.8
India	14.5	15.8	16.4	16.1
Indonesia	3.6	3.8	3.4	n.a.
Malaysia	46.0	48.0	45.0	44.0
Mauritius	43.0	44.0	47.0	47.0
Pakistan	n.a.	n.a.	2.9	2.0
Republic of Korea	83.0	85.0	77.0	81.0
Singapore	173.0	184.0	n.a.	n.a.
South Africa	56.0	54.0	52.0	50.0
Sri Lanka	26.0	n.a.	23.0	n.a.
France	416.0	432.0	436.0	443.0
United Kingdom	309.0	313.0	323.0	325.0
United States	691.0	705.0	729.0	734.0

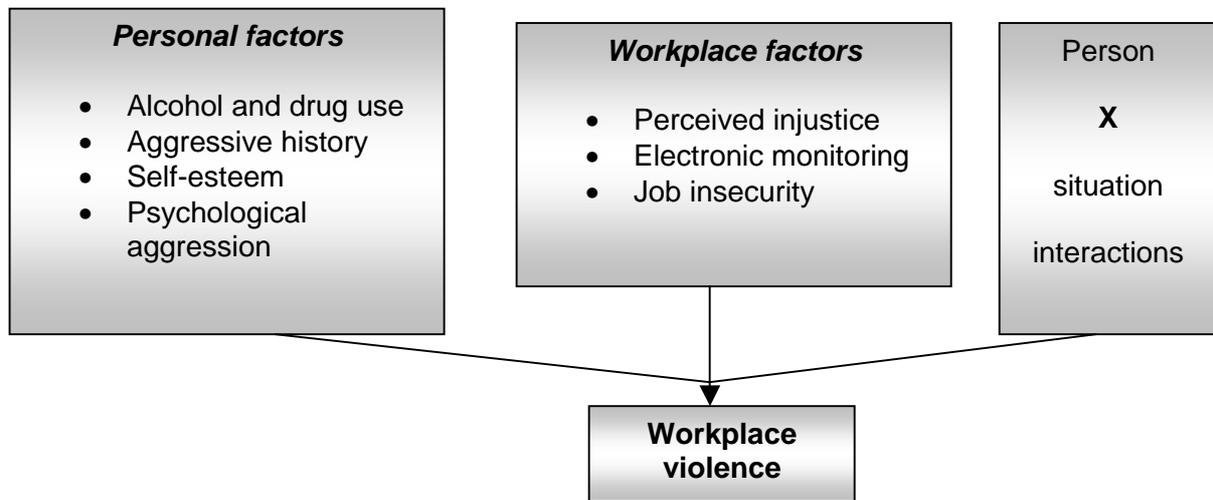
Source: World Bank, 2002.

Data from table 3 indicate the varying degree of mail volume for a number of developing and industrialized countries. There is a trend in industrialized countries of increasing mail volumes and perhaps an increasing workload for employees from these countries.

With the introduction of new technology to increase efficiency and improve quality in mail processing plants, automation of some areas of work such as sorting has increased job insecurity and workload pressures, and resulted in deskilling and loss of social status for employees (de Keyser, Decortis and Crommen, 1988). On the other hand however, there is little evidence of any technological change in the tasks performed by mail delivery employees, whose job remains very physical and labour intensive, and who are required to work long hours doing repetitive and solitary work in harsh working conditions (American Postal Workers' Union, 2001). Such conditions – involving heavy, physical and monotonous tasks – increase the risk of musculoskeletal problems, ill-health and

consequently sickness absence (Voss, Floderus and Diderichsen, 2001), and can be predictors of workplace violence (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Predictors of workplace violence



Source: adapted from Barling, 1996.

Apart from a number of personal and organizational factors associated with workplace violence, Barling (1996) suggests that we must consider the interaction of the individual with their environment, including relationships and expectations. Effective communication therefore, would be a key to ensuring that change initiatives are clearly understood and that employee concerns are dealt with adequately (Giga, Faragher and Cooper, 2002).

2.5. Changes in customer expectations

The traditional role of the post office has changed considerably to offer a more diverse range of products and services including banking facilities, electronic money transfer, insurance and pension services, payment of bills, passport and permit applications, and stationery sales (ILO, 2002; World Bank, 2002). In more rural areas, the range of products and services offered could be even more diverse (ILO, 2000).

As there is an increasing emphasis on developing the range of financial services offered by postal networks, akin to those supplied by banks and building societies, postal workers who handle valuables and cash face an ever-increasing likelihood of being targets of a robbery (Chappell and Di Martino, 2000). Similarly, there is evidence from some countries that employees who are in regular contact with customers are also more at risk of work-related violence (Budd, 2001).

3. Scope of violence and stress in the postal sector and their impact on the sector and its workforce

Various studies of workplace violence and stress have combined the postal and telecommunications sectors together, making it difficult to interpret specific information regarding either sector. However, for the purpose of the present study we have identified a number of useful sources of relevant postal sector information, such as the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Vahtera and Pentti, 1999) and the United Kingdom's Communication Workers' Union Stress Survey (2001).

The study conducted by Vahtera and Pentti (1999) has identified postal work as a particularly hazardous form of employment when compared to a number of other key occupational groups (see box 1).

<p>Box 1 Conditions within the postal sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ fewer than 35 per cent of employees report having the opportunity to influence their work;■ staff have poor opportunities for self-development;■ there is high disparity between job demands and job control;■ postal workers have low authority over decision-making;■ approximately 35 per cent of employees find their work monotonous. <p>Source: Vahtera and Pentti, 1999.</p>
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Of specific concern to employees is the lack of control that they have over their work, with reports of monotonous tasks and a general move towards deskilling of jobs, leaving very little opportunity for personal development.

The costs of stress both to individuals and organizations are extensive (Lim and Teo, 1999; Chappell and Martino, 2000; Hoel, Sparks and Cooper, 2001). Stress is particularly high among workers who experience regular acts of violence, or threats of violence. In particular, younger workers and workers on fixed-term contracts report violence as a major cause of stress in the workplace (Communication Workers' Union, 2001).

Research within the postal sector has shown that organizational outcomes of stress include low productivity, high absenteeism and high turnover. Individuals may suffer from the adverse effects of both physical and mental illness. This includes lower levels of self-esteem, motivation and job satisfaction as well as high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, ulcers and heart disease (Shain, 1999).

3.1. The European Union

In the European Union, work-related stress is the second highest occurring work-related health problem after back pain, affecting approximately 28 per cent of the working population (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002).

In the United Kingdom, 14 per cent of a sample of postal workers saw the threat of violence as bad or very bad (Communication Workers' Union, 2001). The problem is exacerbated because fear of future workplace violence is reported to negatively affect individual psychological and physical health (Rogers and Kelloway, 1997).

The Communication Workers' Union Stress Survey (2001), sampling members working predominantly in the postal services, identified a number of work-related stress issues (see box 2).

Box 2
The effects of stress

- 24 per cent perceive work-related stress as a main health and safety concern;
- 84 per cent feel more stressed now than they did five years ago;
- Main effects of stress:
 - feeling keyed up or on edge – 74 per cent;
 - low energy/tiredness – 73 per cent;
 - difficulty relaxing – 61 per cent;
 - being very irritable – 61 per cent;
 - sleeping poorly – 56 per cent;
 - worrying – 55 per cent.

Source: Communication Workers' Union, 2001.

With a very high percentage of workers reporting increasing levels of stress, some of the symptoms expressed by the respondents – such as “being very irritable” and “feeling keyed up or on edge” – indicate the potential for giving rise to tension and the development of violent situations.

In a nationwide study on workplace bullying in the United Kingdom (Hoel and Cooper, 2000), the highest incidence rates were reported in the postal/telecommunications sector, with 16 per cent of the sample reporting that they had been bullied regularly and 27 per cent had been bullied in the past five years (as compared to a population norm of 14.6 per cent). According to Hoel (2002), managers were identified as the perpetrators in 79.1 per cent of reported incidents and colleagues were perpetrators in 37.2 per cent of incidents (please note that victims can be subjected to bullying by more than one perpetrator at any given time and thus the total percentage here does not equal 100).

The prevalence of sexual harassment and the level to which it is under-reported is evident from a survey (CGIL, 1990) by the postal workers' department of CGIL in Rome, Italy. The CGIL undertook a regional survey of 1,887 female workers from a central post office, in which 20 per cent of the respondents stated that they had rejected sexual advances from their supervisors and colleagues. Furthermore, although 45 per cent reported to being victims of sexual harassment or had witnessed such an event occurring among work colleagues, only 0.5 per cent took any further action by filing a complaint.

3.2. The United States

In the United States Postal Service, out of a total workforce of around 700,000 in the sector, postal worker grievances amount to approximately 150,000 a year, and around 69,000 postal workers face disciplinary hearings from management (Cahill and Landsbergis, 1996). The fact that such incidents occur so frequently within the postal sector implies high levels of job dissatisfaction, low morale and poor management-employee relations.

4. Causes of workplace violence and stress in the postal sector

4.1. Competitive pressures/deregulation

Generally, competitive pressures both for customers and funds have forced businesses to rationalize their operations by reconsidering the way they deal with customers, workers and suppliers (Giga, 2001). Within the postal sector specifically, there is new competition from foreign public operators as well as from the private sector – courier services and new private postal operators (ILO, 2002). Intense technological progress and moves towards globalization, along with relentless organizational change and substantial efforts nationally, regionally and globally to deregulate postal networks, has left former monopolies facing competition for the first time and being forced to consider diversification (ILO, 2002). For some individuals working within the sector, these sudden changes have left them feeling a sense of injustice and betrayal (Beale, 2003).

4.2. Low pay/inequity

Among the causes cited for violence and stress in the postal sector are low pay and pay inequity between managers and workers, i.e. compensation systems that reward managers with performance bonuses but fail to reward employees for achieving performance targets (American Postal Workers' Union, 2001). This may give managers the opportunity to use bullying as a tactic for bending rules and getting rid of unwanted employees from the organization when trying to achieve targets (Hoel, 2002).

However, the reverse is true in India where management salaries are below average compared to their peers in other sectors, and employees are paid higher than average salaries (World Bank, 2002). The Indian Government continues to believe that its postal system, the largest network in the world serving most rural areas, is a social obligation and is prepared to continue providing subsidies to ensure that it continues to operate.

4.3. Poor industrial relations

There has been a long history of labour disputes in the postal industry in many countries. In recent years, there have been difficulties in reconciling public service obligations with greater market orientation in postal services. Outdated monopolistic attitudes by certain parties are blamed for some labour-management problems, while it is argued that a lack of effective communication by management when implementing change programmes have had a negative effect on industrial relations between employees, managers and unions. Conflict has often arisen as a result of new management initiatives to change work practices that staff see as a threat to their future. This tension in industrial relations continues to block future progress and hinders aspirations for the postal service to compete effectively in the marketplace.

4.4. High demand/low control

Within the postal sector, there is evidence to support Karasek's (1979) model associating work-related stress with jobs that are highly demanding while allowing little control (Cahill and Landsbergis, 1996). Many areas of postal work correspond to this model, whereby individuals have high levels of workload but have relatively little autonomy in completing their assigned tasks (Vahtera and Pentti, 1999).

Evidence from the Norwegian Postal Service also suggests that “organizational learning climate”, organizational factors that support or hinder employees when learning how to deal with rapidly changing work environments, may also determine individual susceptibility to job stress, with a feeling of control and a reduction in demands resulting in low levels of work-related stress (Mikkelsen, Saksvik and Ursin, 1998).

Similarly, a study conducted within the Dutch Postal Service on the effect of overtime on psychological health, reported that even a slight increase in the number of hours worked involuntarily by an employee in a low reward situation could cause adverse effects to their psychological health (Van der Hulst and Geurts, 2001).

5. Information collection and reporting on violence and stress in the postal sector

This report has presented evidence of a number of studies that have collected data on postal services. However, there are comparatively few statistics on workplace violence and stress that are gathered at the national level apart from data collected on physical acts of violence (Beale, Cox and Leather, 1995). Furthermore within the United Kingdom, for example, under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR 95) physically violent incidents at work only have to be reported if: (1) there is a death or a specific type of injury; (2) the injured party remains in hospital for more than 24 hours or is absent for more than three consecutive days; or (3) they cause other people to be taken to hospital (Beale, 1999).

As we have stated in this report, extreme cases of violence are a comparatively rare occurrence and therefore do not represent a true picture of the conditions within the sector. Moreover, national information specifically on violence and stress in the postal sector is sporadic. One of the few studies to challenge this situation is the research conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Vahtera and Pentti, 1999), which has amassed longitudinal data for a number of different occupational groups relating to issues of violence and stress in the workplace. Comparison of this data is extremely valuable for developing a better understanding of the major violence and stress issues in organizations.

Determining the precise nature of workplace violence is complicated by the fact that much of the literature and statistical information regarding the subject matter is compiled using various definitions of: (1) what violence is; (2) who it involves; (3) whether the incident occurs within the workplace; (4) if harm is intended; and (5) whether it is a one-off incident (Leather et al., 1999). Psychological incidents, such as bullying and harassment, are therefore usually excluded from the picture. Similarly, there are a number of models of work-related stress.

In recent times, organizations representing employee interests such as trade unions have become more proactive in identifying issues concerning their members. The American Postal Workers' Union (APWU) and the Communication Workers' Union in the United Kingdom, in partnership with other organizations, have both recently attempted to gather workplace violence and stress information from specific organizations within the postal sector. National level health and safety endeavours have also contributed to helping identify the extent, causes and consequences of violence and stress.

6. Illustrative cases of violence and stress in the postal sector

6.1. Rarity of homicide

Contrary to some reports in the press, especially in the United States, workplace homicide in the postal sector is not a commonly occurring event, while other less spectacular, but possibly as harmful, forms of psychological violence such as verbal abuse and bullying are much more prevalent (Rogers and Kelloway, 1997). This concentration on “extreme” acts of physical violence may allow some more subtle acts to fester, and may end in equally tragic circumstances, such as victims not being able to cope with the abuse and eventually suffering severe health problems.

6.2. Racial harassment

The recent case of Jermaine Lee, a 27-year old postal employee from Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, who hanged himself after years of racial harassment from work colleagues, is particularly pertinent, as the events leading to his death demonstrate the effects of relentless abuse on an individual’s self-esteem (Britten, 2002). Mr Lee’s family were awarded damages for racial abuse at an unprecedented posthumous tribunal. An internal investigation into the matter carried out by Royal Mail identified a “macho” culture of bullying and prejudice.

Tensions between communities and ethnic groups from various regions of the world have also been transferred into the workplace. In Northern Ireland, for example, hostilities between Catholics and Protestants were behind the brutal murder of Catholic postman Daniel McColgan by gunmen as he arrived for work, and this resulted in a mass walkout by his colleagues in protest (BBC News, 2002).

6.3. Terrorism

Due to the nature of postal work, employees also face the risk of violence emanating from outside the work environment. This was demonstrated recently in the bio-terrorism/anthrax cases in the United States (USPS, 2001) where emergency precautions were taken to educate employees of the threat. These events highlight the omnipresent dangers postal workers face while processing mass volumes of mail, and the need to remain particularly vigilant to suspect devices such as bombs and incendiary devices.

6.4. Dog attacks

The potential risk of attack from dogs is evident from Australian research, which reveals that dog-related attacks whilst working were experienced by 55 per cent of the sample of postal employees in Brisbane (Wilks, Davey and Andrews, 1994). Furthermore, in Queensland the costs of such injuries amounted to \$435,000 for the period between July 1985 and May 1989. The introduction of protective equipment along with suitable training is recommended.

7. Prevention, reduction, management and coping strategies to address violence and stress in the postal sector

7.1. Risk assessment

Effective identification and reduction of workplace violence and stress requires an awareness of situational variables (Giga, Faragher and Cooper, 2002). Risk management involves evaluating the effectiveness of a range of interventions and can be vital to organizational processes that pursue continuous improvement (Cox et al., 2000). Risk assessment is the appraisal of individual work tasks to assess danger to health and safety, and can assist employers to recognize any inherent or perceived hazards prior to developing intervention programmes to deal with the risk (HSE, 2001).

The United Kingdom Post Office's corporate stress risk assessment process (reproduced below) depicts an example of reducing worker exposure to hazardous working conditions, improving the quality of the physical environment, moderating job demands, improving skill levels and increasing worker authority (Cahill and Landsbergis, 1996), by assessing risk factors known to have the potential to cause stress (regardless of role, type of work and individual factors). The aim is for psychological risk factors to be approached from a risk assessment/prevention model involving evaluations at the corporate, business and unit levels (Communication Workers' Union, 2001), and to assess the different needs of each business by creating bespoke, tailor-made support programmes (Tehrani, 1998). The corporate-level activities are listed in table 5.

Table 5. Corporate-level risk assessment in the United Kingdom Post Office

Risk factor	Assessment
Excessive workload	Appraisal process Job design/evaluation Work allocation/monitoring Sickness absence/annual leave monitoring Stress awareness education
Inappropriate workload	Recruitment/appraisal process Analysis of skills Training Work allocation/monitoring
Excessive hours of work	Ensure contractual hours are reasonable during recruitment process Working hours and overtime monitoring to comply with working time regulations Appraisal/counselling procedures
Unsuitable/unsociable working hours	Job design Adoption of flexible working patterns Appraisal/counselling procedures Welfare support
Individual ability – health grounds	Recruitment process Promotion/transfer process Sick leave procedures Medical welfare support Stress awareness education

Risk factor	Assessment
Excessive workload	Appraisal process Job design/evaluation Work allocation/monitoring Sickness absence/annual leave monitoring Stress awareness education
Inappropriate workload	Recruitment/appraisal process Analysis of skills Training Work allocation/monitoring
Individual ability – competency grounds	Recruitment process Promotion/transfer process Skills/competencies review Training/career development plans Appraisal/counselling procedures
Management style	Recruitment /promotion procedures Leadership training Leadership monitoring and feedback procedures Stress awareness education Harassment reporting and monitoring procedures Grievance reporting and monitoring procedures
Working environment	Setting internal standards to, at the very least, comply with law Facilities management procedures Health and safety risk assessment Monitoring procedures supervision
Fairness at work	Equal opportunities policy and procedures Harassment reporting and monitoring procedures Code of conduct Attendance procedure Grievance reporting and monitoring procedures
Organizational change	Communication procedures Feedback procedures
Physical risks	Health and safety risk assessment procedures Health and safety training and advice procedures
Motivation/morale	Communication procedures Reward/recognition systems Appraisal procedures Feedback procedures

Source: Personal communication from the CWU: May 2001.

7.2. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)

As organizations have become conscious of the effects of workplace violence and stress on individuals, they have introduced Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) offering counselling, advice, referral for specialist treatment and support services for employees who may be experiencing problems emanating either from the work environment or from their personal lives (Highley-Marchington and Cooper, 1998).

The EAP programme within the United States Postal Service, one of the most comprehensive of its kind in the world, involves employees and their families, union representatives, consultants and counsellors, in a preventive programme that promotes well-being and job satisfaction and simultaneously aims to reduce absenteeism, tardiness, conflict and disability grievances. The strategy targets prevention through risk assessment and education, and interventions to deal promptly with threatened or actual occurrences of violence (Kurutz, Johnson and Sugden, 1996).

EAP counsellors for the USPS serve on workplace violation prevention committees, evaluate employee attitudes and organizational climate issues, and respond to critical incidents. Apart from a requirement that counsellors possess a master's degree or doctorate in a counselling subject and more than three years' work experience, the team of 240 full-time counsellors are also trained in specific issues concerning postal services. In addition to a face-to-face service, two 24-hour telephone help lines are accessible to employees free of charge that deal separately with personal and job-related issues.

Problems dealt with by counsellors include interpersonal conflict, depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse, addictions, bereavement and stress. Information and training on work-related issues is also provided including wellness programmes, work-related violence prevention, mental health issues, critical incident stress management, child and elderly care support, workplace diversity, industrial relations and AIDS education. During 1995, the programme dealt with 30,000 new cases, 10 per cent of which were relatives of workers employed by the organization.

The USPS programme has not so far provided any evidence of the programme's success in terms of an evaluation. However, the British Post Office conducted a systematic evaluation of a three-year employee counselling programme for stress in the post office, reporting a reduction of 66 per cent in absent days, and a saving of £100,000 for every 175 employees counselled. It was reported that the programme cost approximately 15 per cent of the total savings it made for the organization (Cooper and Sadri, 1991).

7.3. Increased female participation in the postal sector

A joint ILO-UPU seminar in Bangkok discussed the comparatively low participation rates of women employed in the postal sector (ILO-UPU, 2000). The seminar concluded that special initiatives needed to be implemented in order to increase female participation rates, including job redesign and the introduction of flexible working hours. Such developments could have a significant impact on the incidence of stress and of violence at the workplace in postal services. Many postal organizations have introduced measures to ensure equal opportunities and increase the number of women in managerial positions, including those in Brazil, China, Estonia, Italy, Jamaica, Morocco, Norway, Portugal and South Africa. Australia Post, for example, has a workforce that comprises more than 37 per cent female employees, four of whom also sit on the nine-member Board of Directors (Union Postale, 2002).

8. Summary

Globalization, deregulation, technological progress and changing customer expectations have all had a major impact on postal services worldwide. This sudden transformation has put postal organizations in competition with other private mail service providers and foreign operators (whether public or private). Simultaneously, most postal services face continuously diminishing levels of support from their governments.

Private operators can choose to offer services that are the most profitable in terms of revenue, for example business-to-business parcels. On the other hand, newly privatized or government-owned services may be restricted by existing regulations that require them to continue to provide universal services, regardless of profitability.

This uneven playing field has severe implications for the way postal services are managed. To remain competitive, managers are required to implement new technology, adopt new practices, and ensure that there are efficiency gains in operations. However, there are limits to the pace and direction of change, not least from unions and workers concerned with issues such as job security, poor working conditions, worker safety and pay. Apart from the existing perils that postal workers confront in terms of aggression from the public, there is also the threat of terrorism, dangers associated with handling valuable goods, as well as poor management and a lack of communication within these organizations; these factors can lead to workers feeling unable to cope with the demands of work, and can allow tensions between various members to intensify.

Countries that promote decent pay and working conditions for postal workers are likely to ensure better postal services and fewer problems with violence and stress through better industrial relations and greater worker motivation. Regional social dialogue in the postal sector, encouraged by the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the ILO and employers' and workers' organizations can assist in the provision and maintenance of a universal postal network that recognizes the need for change and modernization in postal services. Central to this process is the involvement of unions and managers in an effort to improve the services and working conditions of all employees.

Key national and international bodies such as the ILO and the UPU, government safety agencies, workers' organizations, postal employers and NGOs continue to play a central role in ensuring that individual worker health, safety and dignity is maintained, by continuing to highlight the dangers faced by individuals in pursuit of carrying out their daily tasks.

9. Main studies, literature and web sites

9.1. List of postal sector studies

Author (year)	Title and publication details
Beale, D., 2003.	Engaged in Battle: Exploring the Sources of Workplace Militancy at Royal Mail, in <i>Industrial Relations Journal</i> 34(1): 80-93.
Cahill, J. and P.A. Landsbergis, 1996.	Job Strain Among Post Office Mail handlers, in <i>International Journal of Health Services</i> 26(4): 731-750.
Diamond, M. A., 1997.	Administrative Assault: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic View of Violence and Aggression in the Workplace, in <i>American Review of Public Administration</i> 27(3): 228-247.
Eriksen, H.R. & H. Ursin, 1999.	Subjective Health Complaints: Is Coping More Important Than Control?, in <i>Work and Stress</i> 13(3): 238-252.
Rains, S. 2001.	“Don’t suffer in silence: Building an effective response to bullying at work”, in N. Tehrani (ed.), <i>Building a Culture of Respect: Managing Bullying at Work</i> . London: Taylor and Francis.
Tehrani, N. 1998.	Counselling in the Workplace: The Organizational Counsellor, in <i>Counselling Psychology Quarterly</i> 11(1): pp. 23-32.
Vahtera, J. and J. Pentti, 1999.	<i>Employees in the Storm of Economy: Trends in Psychosocial Working Conditions 1990-1997</i> , Finnish Institute of Occupational Health/Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
Voss, M., B. Floderus, and F. Diderichsen, 2001.	Physical, Psychosocial, and Organizational Factors Relative to Sickness Absence: A Study Based on Sweden Post, in <i>Occupational Environmental Medicine</i> 58: 178-184.
World Bank 2002.	<i>The Reform of India Post: Transforming a Postal Infrastructure to Deliver Modern Information and Financial Services</i> . Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group

9.2. List of other related studies

Author (year)	Title and publication details
Baron, R. A. and J.H. Neuman, 1996.	Workplace Violence and Workplace Aggression: Evidence on their Relative Frequency and Potential Causes, in <i>Aggressive Behavior</i> 22: 161-173.

- Beale, D., 1999. *Monitoring Violent Incidents in Leather*, P., C. Brady, C. Lawrence, D. Beale, and T. Cox, (eds.), *Work-related Violence: Assessment and Intervention*. London: Routledge.
- Hoel, H., K. Sparks, and C.L. Cooper, 2001. *The Cost of Violence/Stress at Work and the Benefits of a Violence/Stress-free Working Environment*. Geneva: ILO.
- Paoli, P. and D. Merllié, 2001. *Third European Survey on Working Conditions 2000*. Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Wynne, R.N., N. Clarkin, T. Cox, and A. Griffiths, 1997. *Guidance on the Prevention of Violence at Work*. Luxembourg: European Commission.

9.3. List of web sites/URLs specific to the postal sector

Title	Web address	Comments
ILO Postal Sector home page	http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/sectors/postal.htm	General information on postal sector including working conditions, labour relations, reports and current issues.
Union Network International home page	http://www.union-network.org/unipostal.nsf	General information on postal sector including working conditions, labour relations and current issues.
Union Network International story on changes in postal industry	http://www.union-network.org/unipostal.nsf/f883670a51012647c125681100363a47/0f99ccb3368dfc32c12568d30057e723?OpenDocument	Information on multinationals and technological change.
Union Network International/ Anthrax alert	http://www.union-network.org/UNIsite/In_Depth/Health_Safety/Anthrax.htm	Postal unions Anthrax overview/links.
Universal Postal Union home page	http://www.upu.int	General information on postal sector including working conditions, labour relations, reports, postal statistics and current issues.
Union Postale: Universal Postal Union's periodical.	http://www.upu.int/publications/en/upu_periodical.shtml	Published four times a year, covering topics of current interest to larger postal and related industries.
European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations	http://www.cept.org	Activities include cooperation on commercial, operational, regulatory and technical standardization issues.

International Post Corporation (IPC)	http://www.ipc.be	Web site for the cooperative association of 23 national Postal operators from North America, Europe and the Pacific.
The Association of European Public Postal Operators (PostEurop)	http://www.posteurop.org	Service providing information to public postal operators in Europe.
Association for Postal Commerce	http://www.postcom.org	United States National association of businesses and organizations that use or support the use of mail as a medium for business communication and commerce.
Postal News	http://www.postalnews.com	United States news source for daily updated news on the postal sector.
Pitney Bowes' Postinsight	http://www.postinsight.pb.com	Global news source on postal services.
Pitney Bowes' Postinsight – Search	http://www.postinsight.pb.com/search.cfm?query=violence#Focus	Several news summaries related to postal services and violence.
Postal Commission Releases Report on Workplace Violence	http://www.casacolumbia.org/newsletter1457/newsletter_show.htm?doc_id=34000	The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University Newsroom Release.
USPS – Press Release Archive	http://www.usps.com/news/2001/press/mailsecurity/pmarchive.htm	Series of press releases regarding Anthrax – threat/safety of employees.
USPS – 8 Nov. 2001	http://www.usps.com/news/2001/press/pr01_1108_911.htm	United States: Press release on Anthrax threat.
USPS – 23 Oct. 2001 – What We Can Do to Make the Mail Safe	http://www.usps.com/news/2001/press/pr01_1023safe.htm	USPS press release on making mail safe.
USPS – Suspicious Mail Alert Poster	http://www.usps.com/news/2001/press/mailsecurity/security.htm	Link for instruction poster on how to handle suspicious mail.
USPS – How we're making the public and employees safe	http://www.usps.com/news/2001/press/pr01_1029steps.htm	USPS measures to ensure the safety of employee and the general public.
USPS – Emergency Preparedness Plan	http://www.usps.com/news/2002/epp/welcome.htm	USPS emergency action plan for protecting postal employees and the public from bio-terror attacks.
USPS – Mail Center Security	http://www.usps.com/news/2001/press/pr01_1022gsa.htm	Several manuals, guidelines on security in a mail centre, covering different hazards (e.g. violence).
Canada Post – Announcement	http://www.canadapost.ca/business/corporate/about/announcements/hazard-e.asp	Suspicious mail alert.
Guidelines for workplaces identifying and handling anthrax and other biological agent threats	http://www.gov.on.ca/lab/ohs/ohs_e/hsg_anthrax_e.htm	Canada: Guidelines how to handle suspicious mail, not postal service specific.

Postal Clerks Blueprint for Health	http://blueprint.bluecrossmn.com/topic/postal	“Going postal” = new expression for workplace violence.
Safety Currents	http://www.coastal.com/Currents/Archive/2000/000619.htm	About relation OSHA and USPS.
Metroactive Features Postal Workers	http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/08.06.98/cover/postal-9831.html	Article with some info on violence postal services United States.
BBC News – Health: Bullying bosses “cause sickness”	http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1166708.stm	Quoting a Swedish study on postal workers.
BBC News UK Postal workers return to work after death threats	http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/north_ireland/1764437.stm	Postal workers resume work after murder of a colleague and further threats to safety.

9.3. List of other web sites/URLs related to the postal sector

Title	Web address	Comments
Australian Institute of Criminology Occupational violence in Australia an annotated bibliography of prevention policies	http://www.aic.gov.au/research/cvp/occupational/index.html	AIC bibliography occupational violence (overview on international literature and Australian initiatives).
Occupational violence	http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/occ-violence.pdf	Findings from British Crime Survey 2000.
Fourth Network Meeting of the WHO Collaborating Centres in Occupational Health	http://www.who.int/oeh/OCHweb/OCHweb/OSHPages/OSHDocuments/GlobalWorkPlan2002-5/Summary_Report.htm	General information on Occupational Health and Safety.
OSH Answers Workplace Stress – General	http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/stress.html	General information on stress.
EU stress Agency report	http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/203/en/stress.pdf	
CA: OSH Answers Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)	http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/eap.html	Canadian OHS. Not sector-specific.
ILO: Sexual harassment, violence and stress – conditions of Work	http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/condtrav/sex/sex_pub_violence.htm	Annotated bibliographies on violence and on harassment at work.
United States job stress info	http://www.stress.org/job.htm	Job stress general information.
Stressed to breaking point	http://www.stress.org.uk/tuc.htm	TUC survey 1996, including different relevant sectors.

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