
VIOLENCE AND STRESS

Scope and impact of violence and stress

Postal workers have been identified as a “high risk” occupation for exposure to violence and stress: indeed, the term “going postal” has become synonymous with serious acts of workplace violence. However, less severe and therefore sometimes more inconspicuous acts of violence, such as threats and psychological abuse, occur far more frequently, and affect postal and telecommunications services workplaces to a varying extent.

The nature of postal work means that employees face the risk of violence and stress emanating from outside the work environment. There are omnipresent dangers to postal workers while processing mass volumes of mail, and they need to remain particularly vigilant about suspect devices such as bombs and incendiary devices. Postal workers also face aggression from the public, dangers associated with handling valuables, as well as heightened stress due to organizational reforms and the impact of mergers and acquisitions, globalization, new technology, new work practices, business performance and the like. These factors have strained relationships between managers, employees and workers’ organizations, have given rise to job insecurity, dissatisfaction and conflict among the workforce, and can lead to workers feeling unable to cope with the demands of work and allowing tensions to intensify.

In 2005, the Royal Mail Group announced a national agreement with the CWU and the CMA on tackling stress within the company. The Royal Mail Group published a Policy on the Management of Stress entitled Safety standard: Stress management, which contains useful information, advice and approaches to risk assessment.

The prevalence of sexual harassment and the level of under-reporting is evident from a regional survey of women postal workers in Italy, in which 20% of the respondents stated that they had rejected sexual advances from their supervisors and colleagues. Although 45% reported being victims of sexual harassment or had witnessed such an event occurring among work colleagues, only 0.5% took any further action by filing a complaint.

Causes of workplace violence and stress

Intense technological progress and moves towards globalization, along with organizational change and substantial efforts nationally, regionally and globally to regulate postal services, have left former postal monopolies facing competition for the first time and being forced to consider diversification. These sudden changes in certain circumstances have caused deteriorating industrial relations, with conflict often arising as a result of new management initiatives, and workers feeling a sense of injustice and betrayal. Further, work-related stress is usually associated with jobs that are highly demanding and simultaneously allow little control; many areas of postal work correspond to this model, whereby individuals have heavy workloads but little autonomy in completing their assigned tasks.

For further information:

Violence and stress at work in the postal sector, by Sabir Giga, Helge Hoel and Cary Cooper, Sectoral Activities Working Paper, WP 200, Geneva, ILO, 2003.

Workplace Violence in Services Sectors and Measures to Combat this Phenomenon: An ILO Code of Practice, Geneva, ILO, 2004.