

## INFLUENCE OF SUPERVISION AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES ON SOCIAL WORK WITH AGGRESSIVE CLIENTS: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE INCIDENCE OF CLIENT VIOLENCE

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the incidence of client violence in the Slovak Republic. The author presents a definition of client violence. It offers an overview of research on the issue of client violence in the helping professions with an emphasis on research undertaken in the field of social work in different countries. The author presents a retrospective view of client violence research - comparison of results obtained in 2007 and 2013. The findings confirm the increased incidence of all forms of client violence. It also offers a comparison of client violence with researches from different countries. At the end of this paper the author is checking the relationship between client violence and supervision and preventive measures for victims of workplace violence, which she verified by the correlation analysis.

**Key words:** violence at work, client violence, forms of client violence, client violence research in social work.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

During the last thirty years incidence of client violence in the helping professions has been gradually increasing. It is caused by various factors, overall development of the society, increase in criminality, and world-wide crisis, which resulted in global growth of social issues.

In terms of typology, according to OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, USA) the client violence is the second type of workplace violence:

- I. The first type is the most common workplace violence. It is the workplace violence committed by a stranger in risky occupations, such as 24/7 stores, liquor stores, 24/7 gambling clubs, jewellery stores etc.
- II. The second type of violence includes incidents when an employee providing the service becomes a victim. In this type of workplace violence the perpetrator is a recipient of these services. It can be for example a client of social worker or a patient in health care establishments.
- III. The third type of violence in this categorisation consists of incidents, in which the perpetrator is a person working in the same organisation as a victim. It can be a co-worker, former employee or superior of a victim.

The client violence in social work is understood as any (verbal or physical, intentional and unintentional) threat, assault or attack by a client (a former client, family relative of a client) against a social worker.

### 2 CLIENT VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL WORK AND OTHER HELPING PROFESSIONS – OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

The first studies undertaken in the issue of client violence were focused on the helping professions in general. The most often these studies involved physicians, psychiatrists, health professionals, psychologists, and social workers. They were usually aimed at identification of a threat by a client – a patient, a feeling of threat, and assault.

Whitman<sup>1</sup> noted that 43% of the survey participants – psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers had felt threatened by their patients, and 24% had been assaulted. Bernstein<sup>1</sup> reported that in his sample of marriage and family counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers, 36% had been threatened with assault and 14% had been assaulted by client. Another threatened group consists of people working in the field of mental health and those working with mentally ill, in particular after deinstitutionalisation treatment of mentally ill patients in USA.

The workers providing social assistance, services or care, nurses and health professionals constitute the group that is at the highest risk, which is also indicated by results of several studies. In Poland Merecz, Drabek and Mościcka<sup>2</sup> conducted a survey of 1,163 nurses, which revealed that 90% of them had reported incidents of verbal abuse from clients, and 2% had been targets of physical aggression. Alexander et al.<sup>3</sup> in the study undertaken with a sample of 1,522 nurses, health professionals, and physicians in Australia found out that almost 70% of them had experienced violence from patient. The particularly threatened group consists of physicians and health professionals in the field of psychiatry, which was also proven by the study of Privitera et al.<sup>4</sup> who found out at one university Department of Psychiatry that 53% of psychiatrists had been threatened and 25% had been assaulted by a patient. Finnish study<sup>5</sup> identified incidence of occupational accidents caused by a person other than the co-worker in various occupations, and showed that the most accidents happened in the health care professions, i.e. 34% of all occupational accidents, and the second highest number of accidents happened to social workers, i.e. 19%.

One of the most significant authors dealing with the issue of client violence in social work is Christina E. Newhill<sup>6</sup>. Her study of prevalence and risk factors for client violence toward social workers is a milestone in this field. She conducted the survey in 1993 in USA in Pennsylvania and California. In the survey 1,600 respondents were addressed and 1,129 filled questionnaires were returned. Respondents – social workers were randomly selected by computer from membership directory of the NASW (National Association of Social Workers in USA). In the questionnaire Newhill distinguished three types of client violence: property damage, threat in the form of verbal threatening or threat in the form of physical gesture and assault, which she further divided into two sub-categories: actual assault, in case of which the client laid hands on social worker, and attempted assault, which did not involve physical contact. 57% of the respondents had experienced one or more types of client violence during their career, 83% of them had been threatened by a client and 40% had experienced attempted assault or physical assault by a client. In the study the author also determined to what extent social workers perceive client violence as an issue. The results showed that 78% of the respondents consider this issue to be significant for social work, although only 31% of them stated that they had experienced this issue during their practice. 52% of the respondents stated that they had felt fear at some moment while working with clients. Another aim was to determine whether the

<sup>1</sup> JAYARATNE, S. - CROXTON, T. - MATTISON, D. A national survey of violence in the practice of social work. In *Families in Society*. ISSN 1044-3894, 2004, vol. 85, No. 4, pp. 445-452.

<sup>2</sup> MERECZ, D. - DRABEK, M. - MOŚCICKA, A. Aggression at the workplace. In *International Journal of Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health*. ISSN 1077-3525, 2009, vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 243-260.

<sup>3</sup> ALEXANDER, CH. et al. Occupational Violence in an Australian Healthcare Setting: Implications for Managers. In *Journal of Healthcare Management*. ISSN 1096-9012, 2004, vol. 49, No. 6, pp. 377-392.

<sup>4</sup> PRIVITERA, M. et al. Violence toward mental health staff and safety in the work environment. In *Occupational Medicine*. ISSN 0964-7480, 2005, vol. 55, No. 6, pp. 480-486.

<sup>5</sup> HINTIKKA, J. - SAARELA, K. L. Accidents at work related to violence – Analysis of Finnish national accident statistics database. In *Safety Science*. ISSN 0925-7535, 2010, vol. 48, pp. 517-525.

<sup>6</sup> NEWHILL, C. E. Prevalence and risk factors for client violence toward social workers. In *Families in Society*. ISSN 1044-3894, 1996, vol. 77, No. 8, pp. 488-495.

respondents achieved specialised education or training for work with an aggressive client. 59% of the respondents had been trained for work with aggressive or potentially aggressive client, and 79% of them would like to receive further education in this issue.

The study undertaken in 1996 in USA by Lucy D. Rey<sup>7</sup> shows that 23% of social workers from research sample of 300 respondents had been physically assaulted by one or more clients during their practice and 63% of them had been aware of violent situations which had happened at their workplace.

Macdonald and Sirotych<sup>8</sup> by their research in reporting of incidence of client violence in random sample of social workers in Canada, Ontario, found out that 87.8% of the respondents reported verbal harassment by a client at least once during their practice, 63.5% had been threatened by physical violence, 28.6% had been at least once assaulted by a client, 7.8% had been injured, i.e. 13 respondents, and injury of six respondents had to be medically treated.

In 2002 Shields and Kiser<sup>9</sup> conducted a survey in USA to find out the extent and type of client violence toward social workers. 171 respondents, child social workers and workers in the sector of providing various types of financial assistance, participated in the study. In the questionnaire the authors defined psychological violence as non-physical violence, including threats, offensive language, and shouting at a worker during his conversation with a client. Physical attack was defined as hitting, throwing objects or "grabbing" a social worker, i.e., situations of physical contact between a client and a social worker. Conversation was defined as behaviour of a worker, by which he tries to de-escalate the client violence. 56% of the respondents stated that they had experienced a threat of violence while working with clients. Almost 10% of the respondents had been physically attacked by a client. A majority of the respondents experienced during their work with the client that the client shouted at them or verbally insulted them. 28% of them stated that they had been verbally sexually assaulted by a client and 67% felt the danger when visiting a client at home.

In 2004 Jayaratne, Croxton and Mattison<sup>1</sup> conducted a national survey of violence in USA, using a sample of 941 respondents randomly selected from the membership directory of the NASW. The sample of respondents included social workers from different fields of social work – health care, mental health, education system, family care, and family services etc. They were interested in incidence of individual forms of client violence and found out that 22.8% of their respondents had been physically threatened, 3.3% physically assaulted, 15.1% threatened with a lawsuit, 1.4% sued, 49.3% verbally abused, and 8.4% sexually harassed by a client during their practice.

Ringstad<sup>10</sup> implemented a survey in USA of 1,029 respondents – social workers, in which he dealt with incidence of client violence in the past year, but also with incidence of violence against clients during the same period. He determined various kinds of psychological and physical aggression. The results showed that 62.3% of the respondents had been assaulted in certain way by psychological aggression and 14.7% by some form of physical aggression. 11.9% of the respondents assaulted their client by psychological aggression and 4% by physical aggression.

Koritsas, Coles and Boyle<sup>11</sup> carried out the research in client violence in Australia on a sample of 1,000 respondents questioned on the basis of the membership directory of the Australian Association of Social Workers. In the questionnaire, the authors identified incidence of six forms of violence during the last twelve months of the respondents' practice. In particular, they focused on verbal assault, understood as use of vulgar language, shouting, and the same situations during telephone conversation with a client, property damage or theft – damage or theft of property of the social worker, his family or workplace. Intimidation in form of intentionally used threatening words and gestures. Physical violence, when a social worker is physically assaulted by a client or there is an attempt of such physical attack. Sexual harassment as any form of sexual allusions, unwelcome sexual advances from a client, profane and offensive jokes and comments with sexual connotations. Sexual assault in form of sexual attack. The identified forms of violence were observed from clients, friends of clients, their family relatives, but also colleagues and other professionals. Results showed that 67% of the respondents had experienced at least one of these forms of violence during the last year. 57% of the respondents had been verbally assaulted, 18% had their property damaged or had been robbed, 47% of the respondents had been intimidated, 9% physically assaulted, 15% had experienced sexual harassment, and 1% of the respondents had been sexually assaulted.

From the above summary of the most significant studies on this issue it is clear that the most common form of violence the social workers have to face in their practice is verbal aggression of their clients.

Incidence of aggression on the part of the clients may be influenced by various factors. Some of these factors are likely to be on the part of these clients. We can try to use them to distinguish risky clients. The study undertaken by the author in 2007 confirmed experience from abroad, where the respondents identified reduction of state benefits for the client, taking the child from the family, and client under influence of narcotic drugs as the most frequent aggressive situations. Within the present grant we would like to focus on more specific identification of risky clients in terms of their gender, race, age, or background.

From all other factors mentioned in this paper we would like to focus especially on supervision, which has become the part of further education of employees of social services providers since 2008. Supervision should represent a significant part of performance of the profession of social worker. For people working with clients in serious and crisis life situations it is one of the most important preventive measures in case of burn-out syndrome and generally in long-term performance of this demanding profession.

### 3 RESEARCH 2007

The study we conducted in 2007 was focused on identification of incidence of selected forms of client violence toward social workers. It confirmed results of the above mentioned studies from abroad. In comparison with the foreign studies there is a lower incidence rate of physical violence in the Slovak Republic, but it is conditioned by overall trend in the society (e.g. according to Eurostat the number of murders per million inhabitants in the Slovak Republic during 2007-2009 was 16.5, in UK it was only 12.5, and in USA it was about 40 murders per million inhabitants per year).

The study was undertaken with a sample of 177 respondents, 21 men, 156 women – employees of the Labour, Social Affairs and Family and SSE (social services establishments) in the Košice Self-governing Region. For the purpose of comparing with above mentioned studies we found out that almost 32% of

<sup>7</sup> REY, L. D. What social workers need to know about client violence. In *Families in Society*. ISSN 1044-3894, 1996, vol. 77, No. 1, pp. 33-39.

<sup>8</sup> MACDONALD, G. – SIROTYCH, F. Reporting client violence. In *Social Work*. ISSN 1468-0173, 2001, vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 107-114.

<sup>9</sup> SHIELDS, G. – KISER, J. Violence and aggression directed toward human service workers. In *Families in Society*. ISSN 1044-3894, 2003, vol. 84, No. 1, pp. 13-20.

<sup>1</sup> JAYARATNE, S. - CROXTON, T. - MATTISON, D. A national survey of violence in the practice of social work. In *Families in Society*. ISSN 1044-3894, 2004, vol. 85, No. 4, pp. 445-452.

<sup>10</sup> RINGSTAD, R. Conflict in the Workplace: Social Workers as Victims and Perpetrators. In *Social Work*. ISSN 1468-0173, 2005, vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 305-313.

<sup>11</sup> KORITSAS, S. - COLES, J. - BOYLE, M. Workplace Violence towards Social Worker: The Australian Experience. In *The British Journal of Social Work*. ISSN 0045-3102, 2010, vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 257-271.

the respondents had experienced at least one physical threat by a client at some point of their career, 10% physical assault, 75% verbal abuse, which makes these results similar and comparable to other results mentioned above.

Within this research we verified several factors, which could have an influence on incidence of client violence or would be related to the same. We tried to determine whether the strategy of coping with aggressive situations of social workers influences incidence of client violence. We used CAS questionnaire, which distinguishes four types of coping with experienced aggression. We wanted to know whether there is any relation between incidence of verbal abuse and a strategy of coping with aggression. This was also confirmed in the factor of appeasement which indicates that the social workers who have a tendency to settle a conflict situation by appeasement, report higher incidence of verbal violence from the clients.

Tab 1 Coping with experienced violence

Correlation coefficient	Contra-aggression	Helplessness	Nonchalance	Appeasement
	- 0.10	0.10	0.05	0.17*

Surprisingly, relation between the factor of contra-aggression and increased incidence of verbal violence, which we had expected, was not confirmed. However, it can be caused by the fact that person who uses the strategy of contra-aggression is less sensitive to verbal violence. In other words, what the person with appeasement strategy considers violence does not have to be considered violent situation by a person using the strategy of contra-aggression.

We also measured the aggression rate by means of AQ questionnaire, which distinguishes four subscales of aggression, i.e. physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. However, relation between individual subscales or overall aggression and incidence of verbal violence was not confirmed.

Tab 2 Aggression rate

Correlation coefficient	Physical aggression	Verbal aggression	Anger	Hostility	OS aggression
	- 0.08	- 0.00	0.01	- 0.03	- 0.03

#### 4 RESEARCH 2013

The study was conducted in 2013 with the sample of 100 respondents, 77 women and 23 men – employees of the Office of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family and Institution of Social Services from the Košice Self-governing Region working with the clients. Its aim was to determine incidence of client violence and verification of impact of selected factors on client violence. Age of respondents (two respondents did not provide the data) ranged from 23 to 60 years, the mean age was 39.76.

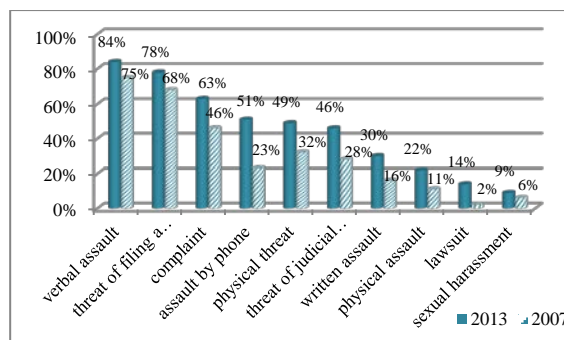
Tab 3 Age of respondents

	min	max	mean	st. dev.
N = 98	23	60	39.76	9.47

The following chart shows a comparison of results of 2007 and 2013. The results present at least one experience of a respondent with the respective situation during his practice, so they do not show frequency of incidence. The growth of client violence incidence in each item is obvious. The most significant growth refers to increase in assault by phone, i.e. by 28%, physical threat by 17%, and threatening with a lawsuit by 18%.

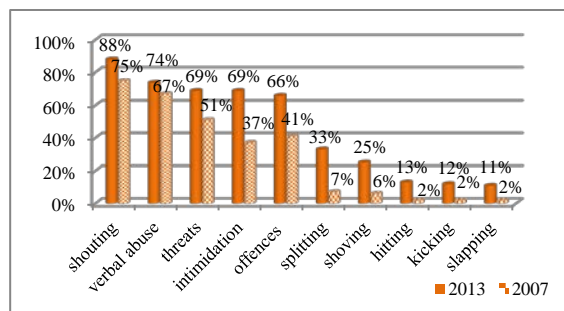
Chart 2 shows a comparison of individual forms of verbal and physical violence of clients toward social workers.

Chart 1 Comparison of client violence incidence



We observed the highest increase in physical aggression; however, it may be caused by the research sample. The most frequent forms of aggression were slightly increased, but confirmed the previous results that verbal aggression occurs to a great extent. The highest increase was shown in spitting by a client, which had been experienced by 33% of the respondents.

Chart 2 Comparison of individual forms of violence



Within this research we examined relation of overall score of threat by a client and supervision. We proceeded from amendment of the Act in 2008 (Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services and on change and amendment of Act No. 455/1991 Coll. on Trade Licensing as amended). Despite the fact that the experience of institutions indicates that this regulation is not followed in practise, we can assume that the workplaces with higher incidence of client violence have regular supervision to protect their workers. The study repeatedly confirmed that supervision is not a matter of course, some social workers even do not know what exactly supervision means. This is the reason why we also asked respondents whether there is any supervision at their workplace or not. It is also surprising that the respondents from the same workplace provided different answers, which can mean for example that supervision is carried out within the competences on the level of individual departments or it is provided only to certain employees.

We assume that the supervised workers are more sensitive to violence, and they would identify the respective situations as violent (they are able to identify such situations). The overall score of supervision consisted of two items: frequency of supervision at workplace (we consider answers 3 and more in 6-degree scale regular supervision at workplace) and assistance of supervision in performing of profession (answers 3 and more in 6-degree scale mean that a worker considers supervision helpful for performance of his profession). In this regard we tested also preventive measures (formal and informal advices from colleagues, prevention at workplace), and due to the same reasons we expected confirmation of the relation.

Relation between threat by a client and supervision as well as a relation between a threat and preventive measures were confirmed. It can mean that the preventive measures are taken at the workplaces with higher frequency of client violence.

Tab 4 OS threat (Cronbach's alfa 0,818)

	OS supervision	OS preventive measures
OS threat		
Pearson Correlation	,286**	,293**
Sig. (2-tailed)	,005	,003

\*\*0.01

We also tested a relation between the factor of verbal violence and the factor of supervision, and a relation between the factor of verbal violence and the factor of prevention at workplace. The relation was confirmed in both cases.

Tab 5 OS verbal violence (Cronbach's alfa 0,936)

	OS supervision	OS preventive measures
OS VV		
Pearson Correlation	,269**	,369**
Sig. (2-tailed)	,008	,000

\*\*0.01

Finally we tested a relation between the factor of physical violence and supervision, which was not confirmed, yet a relation between physical violence and preventive measures was confirmed.

Tab. 6 OS physical violence (Cronbach's alfa 0,796)

	OS supervision	OS preventive measures
OS PV		
Pearson Correlation	,189	,205*
Sig. (2-tailed)	,067	,042

\*0.05

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Only the results directly comparable with our survey are presented below, as the similar studies have been already mentioned above.

Macdonald and Sirotich<sup>8</sup> in Canada noted that 87.8% of the respondents reported having been verbally harassed by a client at least once at some point of their career, which is similar to our results – 84% of the respondents reported having been verbally assaulted by a client. In 2002 Shields and Kiser<sup>9</sup> made a survey with 171 respondents in USA. Apart from other results they also observed that almost 10% of the respondents had been physically assaulted by a client and this situation was reported by as many as 22% of the respondents in our research, however, a question arises as to what respondents consider physical assault and how serious such physical assault was – this issue was not questioned neither by us nor the authors of the above study.

Koritsas, Coles and Boyle<sup>11</sup> carried out a study on client violence in Australia on the sample of 1,000 respondents, in which they determined incidence of various forms of violence during the past year and found out that 57% of the respondents had been verbally assaulted and 9% physically assaulted. We found out that 4% of the respondents reported having been physically assaulted several times a year, and 2% of them at least once a month, which makes comparable 6% during the past year. 23% of the respondents declared that they had been exposed to verbal assault several times a year, 19% at least once a month,

8% at least once a week, and 2% almost every day. After assessment of the results it can be said that during the past year 52% of our respondents experienced verbal assault. It is also a very similar result.

In general we can summarise that incidence of client violence in the Slovak Republic is similar with respect to the number and frequency with findings from other countries. Therefore in the following national survey we would like to focus on mapping of the greatest possible scope of individual forms of client violence, factors that might influence client violence, preventive measures, and determination of risk factors in this issue.

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## Primary Paper Section: A

## Secondary Paper Section: AO

<sup>8</sup> MACDONALD, G. - SIROTICH, F. Reporting client violence. In *Social Work*. ISSN 1468-0173, 2001, vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 107-114.

<sup>9</sup> SHIELDS, G. - KISER, J. Violence and aggression directed toward human service workers. In *Families in Society*. ISSN 1044-3894, 2003, vol. 84, No. 1, pp. 13-20.

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