

THE 1998 TUC SURVEY OF SAFETY REPS

Twenty-one years of saving lives

Background

In the UK, under the Safety Representative and Safety Committee Regulations 1977 (SRSCR 1997), trade unions which are recognised by an employer for collective bargaining purposes have the legal right to appoint health and safety reps. The reps are volunteers who are elected to their position by their members, and have numerous rights given to them by the SRSCR covering such things as, the safety rep's job; time off for their duties and training; rights to information and consultation.

During 1998, the TUC conducted its second biennial survey of health and safety reps through their trade unions. Reps were asked a series of questions that aimed to identify some of their key concerns and experiences. 5,801 reps responded. This is the largest study of safety reps undertaken in the UK.

Hazards

Safety reps were asked to identify up to five of the main hazards of concern to workers at their workplace. **Table A** shows the top ten responses.

Table A: The main hazards of concern to workers

Hazard	% Cited by Safety Reps
Overwork or stress	77
Display Screen Equipment	48
Slips, trips, falls	46
Back strains	44
Repetitive Strain Injuries (RSI)	37
Chemicals or solvents	33
Noise	30
Violence	28
Working alone	28
High Temperatures	27

Overwork or stress is by far the most frequently identified concern, which mirrors the 1996 TUC Health and Safety Reps Survey. 77% of reps identified overwork or stress in 1998, compared with 68% in 1996. In all sizes of undertaking, the percentage citing stress was over 70%. In eleven out of fourteen industrial sectors, stress or overwork was the top complaint of workers; the second top complaint in two sectors; and the fourth top complaint in one sector. Stress or overwork was the only hazard that attained 50% across all the industrial sectors. In eleven out of fourteen sectors, the percentage citing stress was over 70%.

The survey went on to ask safety reps identifying stress as a major problem, to state which issues were affecting workers. **Table B** shows the main responses.

Table B: Factors linked to stress

Factor	Proportion of safety reps linking this factor with stress in the 1998 survey	Proportion of safety reps linking this factor with stress in the 1996 survey
Workloads	60%	Not included in 1996 survey
Staffing levels	60%	Not included in 1996 survey
New management techniques	40%	48%
Long hours	28%	31%
Shift-work	22%	16%
Bullying	21%	14%

The management of health and safety

Risk assessment

Safety reps were questioned about the way that health and safety was managed in their workplace. Under the UK Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, and various other regulations, employers must make a suitable and sufficient assessment of risks. They should record the significant findings (where there are five or more employees).

According to the safety reps responding to the survey:

- less than half the employers had adequate risk assessments (44%);
- 26% of employers had done risk assessments that were considered inadequate by the safety reps;
- no risk assessments had been done in 14% of cases;
- less than three out of ten safety reps were satisfied with their involvement in drawing up the risk assessment. In four out of ten cases (41%), safety reps were not involved at all. 23% of safety reps were involved, but not enough.

Employer provision of occupational health services

Seven out of ten of the safety reps responding said that workers had access to occupational health services. However, that access varied considerably depending on the size of the employer's undertaking, and the sector worked in.

The survey shows that:

- only 37% had access where there were fewer than fifty employees. The figure rose to 76% where there were more than one thousand employees;
- 95% had access in the Health Service, but only 28% in the voluntary sector.

The key focus of occupational health services should be the prevention of workplace health and safety risks, particularly through contributing to the risk assessment process. However, the results of the survey show how limited occupational health services are in the UK, in relation to preventive services.

Respondents show that occupational health services concentrate on:

- first aid	49%;
- sickness monitoring	41%;
- health surveillance	40%;
- pre-employment medical screening	35%;
- advice on prevention	25%;
- treatment	22%;
- disciplinary assessments	16%;
- rehabilitation	13%;
- records which safety reps are given	9%.

Safety reps' rights

Safety reps have extensive rights under the Safety Representative and Safety Committee Regulations 1977, plus additional consultation rights added by later European legislation. The survey put a series of questions on selected rights.

Training

Safety reps' responses to the survey show that extensive use is made of the training facilities provided, with the TUC/Union Stage 1 Course proving to be the most popular. 56% had attended the Stage 1, and 30% their union's own introductory course. Experienced safety reps have undertaken an extensive range of courses which highlights the wealth of union experience and expertise that is available in the workplace. It is no wonder that previous TUC surveys have shown that workplaces with trade union safety reps are safer than those without. Despite legal rights to time off for training, a number of the safety reps surveyed had been unable to access training on occasions. The reasons given were:

- too busy 14%;
- not the right time in the day/week 9%;
- management refused time off 9%

Consultation

One in four of the safety reps surveyed (24%) were automatically consulted on a frequent basis. Four out of ten (41%) were automatically consulted on an occasional basis. Just over six out of ten (64%) were consulted when they asked to be. Two out of ten (21%) were never consulted either automatically or when they asked.

Inspections

Safety representatives have the right to inspect the workplace, if they have given notice to the employer in writing. They can inspect every three months or more frequently by agreement with the employer.

In the survey:

- four out of ten safety reps had inspected once or twice during the last year;
- two out of ten (19%) had inspected three or four times during the last year;
- one in ten had inspected five or more times;
- less than one in ten had not inspected at all (6%).

Time spent on safety rep duties

Safety reps are entitled to reasonable time without loss of pay to carry out their functions. Respondents to the survey indicated how many hours they had spent on their safety rep duties in the previous week. The results showed:

- almost six out of ten respondents (58%) had spent up to one hour;
- three out of ten had spent up to five hours;
- 4% had spent up to ten hours;
- 4% had spent over ten hours.

TUC Action as a result of the survey

The TUC will use the results of this survey of safety reps to guide its work on health and safety over the next few years. But some proposals for action stand out from the report.

Campaigning

The survey results demonstrate the need for:

- a Health and Safety Commission Approved Code of Practice on the prevention of occupational stress;
- a Government-backed campaign to ensure that employers comply with safety laws on preventing musculo-skeletal disorders, and especially back pain;
- a joint TUC campaign with the Royal National Institute for Deaf people (RNID) for early 1999, focusing on the need for individual employees to appreciate the dangers to their hearing, and on the need for employers to prevent exposure where possible and to monitor hearing loss;
- discussions between employers and unions in specific workplaces or sectors about measures to prevent violence at work. The TUC has commissioned research into existing levels of violence in the workplace, as well as union action to combat this growing menace.

Legal changes

The TUC believes that the law should be changed to allow unions or their representatives to:

- make applications to Employment Tribunals to enforce the law on consultation with safety reps over health and safety matters, where employers have demonstrated a sustained failure to consult;
- serve provisional improvement notices where employers have refused to comply with their legal responsibilities (except where such refusals lead to serious and imminent danger of injury);
- represent union members on health and safety matters regardless of whether they work for employers who recognise unions; and
- have joint control with their employers over occupational health services, to ensure that
 - the workforce is fully informed about their work
 - they focus more on the issues of prevention and retaining people at work
 - confidentiality and independence are assured.

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The full 1998 TUC survey of safety reps by Peter Kirby is available from:
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