

Original research article

## **HARASSMENT IN SOCIAL WORK: MANIFESTATIONS, IMPACTS, AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE SOUTH BOHEMIAN REGION**

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### **Abstract**

The theoretical background is based on findings that harassment in social work is a frequent and serious phenomenon, manifesting as verbal attacks, humiliation, threats, and manipulation. The literature highlights the main risk factors as working with socially excluded groups and a lack of institutional support. Coping strategies of workers, supervision, and peer support play a significant role. The aim of this study is to describe the manifestations of socially excluded clients towards social workers and the reactions of social workers to such behaviour, as well as to propose strategies for the prevention and management of this issue in social services in the South Bohemian Region. Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire distributed to social workers across various types of social services in this region. The research sample consisted of 107 respondents, and the data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The research showed that 77% of workers had encountered some form of harassment. The most frequent manifestations were verbal attacks, humiliation, and threats; physical assaults and sexual harassment were less common. The most at-risk client groups included homeless people and individuals with addiction. The impacts of harassment mainly involved psychological fatigue, decreased motivation to work, and increased risk of burnout syndrome. Social workers most often cited peer support, supervision, and the use of institutional support as key coping strategies.

**Keywords:** *Coping strategies; Harassment; Social exclusion; Social work; Supervision; Working conditions*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Social work is a demanding helping profession that is inextricably linked to daily contact with diverse client groups, often in situations of personal or social crisis. Social service workers are exposed not only to high psychological and emotional stress, but also to a whole range of unexpected and difficult situations that often go beyond the scope of normal professional interaction. One significant (but often underestimated) phenomenon is harassment; not only from clients, but also from clients' family members or the wider public. This behaviour is particularly problematic in clients who are socially excluded, show increased lev-

els of frustration, aggression or helplessness, and whose attitudes or actions can fundamentally affect the safety and well-being of social service employees. The issue of harassment in the context of social work is gaining increasing attention; not only in professional literature but also within organisations and institutions themselves, which are seeking effective ways to protect and support their employees.

This study aims to describe the behaviour of socially excluded clients towards social workers, the reactions of social workers to this behaviour, and to propose strategies for preventing and addressing this issue. The research is focused on a detailed analysis of the forms of harassment that social workers

encounter, the impact on the professional and personal lives of workers, and the effectiveness of individual coping strategies. Given current developments in social services and the increasing demands for employee protection, it is important to not only identify specific risks associated with working with socially excluded clients, but also to offer practical recommendations that enhance worker safety and overall satisfaction.

### **Theoretical framework**

Harassment in the workplace has become a significant issue in recent years, including in the field of social work. Research shows that social workers are among the most vulnerable groups to various forms of harassment and aggression from clients, their family members and the wider public (Sousa et al., 2013). An international meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2019) involving more than 331,000 workers found that 61.9% of respondents reported workplace harassment. In the Czech context, Lovašová (2013) found that 57% of social workers had experienced some form of aggression from clients. In this context, harassment includes a wide range of behaviours, from verbal attacks and humiliation, through threats, to physical violence or sexual innuendo. A significant feature of harassment in social work is its complexity – aggressive expressions are not always explicit, they often involve subtle forms of non-verbal intimidation, repeated insults, discrimination, or manipulative behaviour that violates the professional boundaries of the worker (Hodgins et al., 2020). In Czech and international professional discourse, harassment in social work is understood as systematic, repeated behaviour that creates a hostile, humiliating, or intimidating environment and violates the dignity and psychological well-being of workers (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). Social work is characterised by intensive and often emotionally tense contact with clients who are exposed to high levels of stress, frustration, or social dysfunction. These specificities contribute to the increased vulnerability of workers who, within the framework of their profession, must manage not only professional requirements but also unexpected and unpredictable situations involving aggression, disagreement, or distrust from clients (Havlíková and Hubíková, 2022).

An important context for understanding harassment is social exclusion. Socially excluded clients represent a specific group that is often more prone to aggressive or harassing behaviour. Factors such as long-term poverty, existential insecurity, experience of discrimination, mental illness, or addiction to addictive substances can increase the likelihood that the client will be unable to regulate their emotions and will vent their frustrations and feelings of powerlessness towards workers (Gilíková, 2020; van Veelen et al., 2020). Studies indicate that typical manifestations of harassment in these cases include not only verbal attacks and humiliation, but also attempts to manipulate, threaten, or intimidate to obtain a specific service or response from the worker (Sousa et al., 2013).

Harassment is not only a problem of interpersonal communication between the client and the worker, but also affects the wider work environment and institutional culture. Organisations that do not have clearly set rules for resolving incidents, do not provide systematic support to employees and do not allow regular supervision or intervention, contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of uncertainty and increased psychological burden. Conversely, institutions that openly communicate the risks of harassment and support employees in developing coping strategies can significantly reduce the impacts of this phenomenon and strengthen professional resilience (Ravalier et al., 2021).

According to Havlíková and Hubíková (2022), harassment in social work has a significant impact on workers' mental and physical health. It is most often associated with the development of burnout syndrome, increased stress, anxiety, depression, and overall emotional exhaustion. In addition to psychological difficulties, somatic symptoms such as sleep disorders, headaches, chronic fatigue, or weakened immunity also appear, which further increases the overall risk of long-term disability (Havlíková and Hubíková, 2022). Coping strategies social workers use to manage harassment can be divided into internal and external strategies. Internal strategies include strengthening psychological resilience, using assertiveness, effective communication skills, and relaxation techniques. The key is the ability to set and maintain professional boundaries while maintaining a respectful

approach to the client, even if their behaviour is difficult or aggressive (Matoušek, 2013). External strategies include peer support, supervision, regular training, and institutional safeguarding of workers (Ravalier et al., 2021). Current literature also emphasises the importance of institutional support, including the creation of methodological materials, crisis plans, and clear communication of workers' rights and responsibilities in threatening situations. Openly addressing harassment issues and destigmatising these experiences contribute to creating a safer and more supportive work environment (Stanley and Buvanewari, 2022). According to the authors, training in crisis communication, conflict prevention, and stress management also plays an important role.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this study, a quantitative research strategy was chosen to map social workers' experiences of harassment by socially excluded clients, determine their reactions and coping strategies, and propose specific practice recommendations.

The study aimed to determine whether social workers' reactions to harassment depend on their length of experience in social work, and whether the strategy for dealing with harassment is influenced by the target group with which the social worker is currently working.

The research was conducted through an anonymous online questionnaire, which enabled us to address a larger, more diverse group of respondents, and obtain a representative overview of the current situation in social services in the South Bohemian Region. The questionnaire was compiled based on an analysis of professional literature and reflected key topics related to the occurrence of harassment in social work. It contained 14 questions, divided into several thematic blocks. The first part focused on basic information about the respondents, such as gender, length of experience in the field, and the main target group of clients they work with. The next part of the questionnaire investigated specific experiences with harassment, its frequency, forms, and the most common agents of this

behaviour. The following section focused on the impacts of harassment on workers' mental and physical health, and the last block examined coping strategies, organisational support, and other needs of respondents in this area. The questionnaire combined closed and open questions, enabling not only the quantification of key phenomena, but also the capture of social workers' personal experiences and subjective views.

The research group consisted of social workers from services across South Bohemia who encounter socially excluded clients. The approach was made through contacts with organisations obtained from the Register of Social Services. A total of 107 respondents participated in the research, most of whom were women, which corresponds to the field's overall gender distribution. In terms of practice length, the representation was varied: almost half of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience, approximately a third had worked in the field for 1–5 years, and the rest were divided between shorter and medium lengths of practice. The research group included workers from shelters, low-threshold day centres, dormitories, field programs, crisis centres, therapeutic communities, facilities for people with disabilities, and social prevention or social rehabilitation services.

Data were collected via an online platform, which allowed respondents to complete the questionnaire anonymously and at a time that suited them. Completion was voluntary; all questions were marked as mandatory to analyse complete responses from all participants. After collection, the data were processed and analysed using descriptive statistics, which allowed for describing the distribution of responses, identifying the main trends, and comparing results across different groups of respondents.

From an ethical point of view, all data were processed anonymously; respondents were informed in advance of the survey's purpose and that data would be used for scientific and professional purposes only. The research focused on practice in the South Bohemian Region, which is a limitation when it comes to generalising the results. However, the breadth of services represented and the number of respondents ensure sufficient validity of the conclusions for this region.

## RESULTS

107 social workers from South Bohemia conducted the research survey. 86% were women and 14% were men. In terms of length of practice, the representation was diverse – 44% of respondents had worked in the field for more than ten years, almost a third (29%) had worked in social services for 1–5 years, 19% of respondents reported 6–10 years of practice, and 8% had been in the field for less than a year. In terms of the focus of the service, they most often worked with people with mental or physical disabilities (36%), people at risk of social exclusion (28%), homeless people (15%), and clients with mental illness or addiction (12%).

A fundamental finding is that 77% of respondents experienced harassment from socially excluded clients, confirming the high incidence of this phenomenon in everyday practice. The most common were verbal attacks (71% of those who experienced harassment), humiliation (44%), threats (40%), and inappropriate comments (31%). Physical attacks (14%) or sexual harassment (6%) were recorded significantly less frequently. The results also show that the forms and intensity of harassment are partly influenced by the type of target group with which the workers come into contact. The highest incidence of verbal and physical aggression was reported by workers of low-threshold services and shelters who worked with homeless people and people addicted to addictive substances. In contrast, workers of facilities for people with mental or physical disabilities mentioned passive forms of resistance or manipulative behaviour.

The impact of harassment on workers was significant, particularly in the area of mental health. Psychological fatigue was reported by 60% of those who experienced harassment, more than half (53%) perceived reduced motivation to work, almost a third (28%) suffered from sleep disorders, and almost a fifth (19%)

felt an increased risk of burnout. It is also significant that repeated negative experiences led 13% of workers to consider changing positions or leaving the field altogether.

In terms of coping strategies, the need for support from colleagues (82% of respondents), regular participation in supervision (63%) and, in the case of more serious incidents, seeking institutional support (34%) were clearly predominant. Workers often mentioned that good teamwork and open communication are key to managing challenging situations. Many also emphasised the need for ongoing education in crisis intervention and assertiveness training, or for the possibility of anonymous consultation with an external expert.

The aim was to determine whether the chosen strategy for responding to harassment depends on workers' experience. The non-parametric Mann–Whitney *U* test was used for statistical testing, which is suitable for comparing two independent groups – in this case, workers who used a given strategy vs those who did not use it. For the “assertive techniques” strategy, the test result was as follows:  $U = 1234.0$ ;  $p$ -value = 0.3759. Given that the  $p$ -value is higher than the specified significance level of 0.05, no statistically significant difference in the length of experience between those who use assertive techniques and those who do not use them was found (Table 1).

Another aim of the study was to determine whether the harassment resolution strategy is influenced by the target group with which the worker works. The chi-square test of independence was used to determine this. The results show a statistically significant relationship between the chosen strategy and the target group ( $\chi^2 = 4.7304$ ;  $p = 0.0296$ ) for the “assertiveness” strategy and the target group “homeless people”. For all other strategies across target groups, statistical significance was not demonstrated ( $p > 0.05$ ) – Table 2.

**Table 1 – Dependence of harassment response strategy on length of practice ( $\chi^2$  test results)**

Target group and Coping strategy	$\chi^2$ statistics	p-value	Significance ( $p < 0.05$ )
Homeless people			
ignoring	0.4926	0.4828	none
verbal defence	0.604	0.437	none
assertiveness	4.7304	0.0296	yes
peer support	0.1115	0.7384	none
Romany minority			
ignoring	0.108	0.7425	none
verbal defence	0.2379	0.6257	none
assertiveness	1.4844	0.2231	none
peer support	0.167	0.6828	none
Addicted people			
ignoring	0.0647	0.7992	none
verbal defence	0.1989	0.6556	none
assertiveness	2.674	0.102	none
peer support	0.0183	0.8923	none
Disabled people			
ignoring	0	1	none
verbal defence	0.2224	0.6372	none
assertiveness	0.9225	0.3368	none
peer support	1.7949	0.1803	none

**Table 2 – Use of coping strategies and results summary**

Reaction	Used	Did not use
Ignoring	28	62
Verbal defence	58	49
Assertiveness	65	42

## DISCUSSION

Zimunya and Alpaslan (2022) found that social workers use different approaches to managing client violence; from avoiding risky situations, to peer support, to using organisational mechanisms. These strategies reflect the need for systemic support and training, consistent with this research's findings, which show that the lack of institutional support is often perceived as a problem. Similarly, Calderón-Orellana et al. (2023) demonstrated a high incidence of aggression towards workers and the dominance of passive strategies, such as ignoring, in Chilean hospitals. Here too, it was shown that organisational support and prevention are often lacking, as confirmed in the Czech context. Johnsen et al. (2018) point out that even less visible forms of social control can be problematic. According to them, active strategies are chosen in the group of homeless people, which is also con-

firmed by this work, where there was a statistically significant connection with the choice of assertive techniques in this group. Munobwa et al. (2023) show that the choice of strategies in practice is very diverse and reflects not only the type of client, but also the personal preferences of the workers, which is also consistent with the findings of this survey – strategies go beyond the framework of formal rules and are influenced by individual ethics and experience. Andoval and Martinez (2022) further confirmed that effective management of aggressive behaviour is related to the level of professional training, self-confidence, and length of practice, and that without regular training and supervision, workers may choose less effective strategies. Similarly, in this research, respondents often mentioned the need for methodological guidelines, stronger systematic support, and education in de-escalation and conflict management. Therefore, the results show that responses to harassment are individual and contextually conditioned, and confirm the need for organisational support, professional training, and further research into effective approaches to preventing and managing harassment in social work.

Although the study provides valuable, empirically based findings on the incidence and forms of harassment of social workers, it is necessary to note several significant limitations that should be taken into account when

interpreting the results. In particular, the research provides a relatively detailed overview of the forms of harassment social workers encounter and highlights their impact on workers' psychological well-being. However, the analysis remains partially limited in the area of variables that may significantly modify these results.

Although the research sample included both women and men, the study did not analyse possible gender differences in the frequency of harassment or in responses to it. Gender can play a significant role in both the subjective experience of harassment and the choice of coping strategies, or in the willingness to report incidents. The absence of this analysis represents one of the study's limitations and is also an incentive for further research. Another limitation is the fact that psychological impacts, such as fatigue, reduced work motivation, or increased risk of burnout, are primarily interpreted as a consequence of experiences with harassment. In the real-world social services environment, these manifestations often arise from the accumulation of multiple stressors. Significant factors may include, for example, low financial remuneration, high administrative burden, shortage of personnel, organisational problems, or the quality of the organisation's management. These variables were not systematically monitored within the scope of this research, which may affect the interpretation of the relationship between harassment and workers' psychological burden.

For a deeper understanding of this issue, it would therefore be appropriate to conduct a follow-up research investigation that systematically includes these variables and allows for the analysis of their mutual interactions. Such a research design could provide a more realistic picture of how various stressors shape social workers' workload, and which preventive or intervention strategies are truly effective in practice. At the same time, it is appropriate to interpret the results of this study in the broader context of working conditions in social services. Although client harassment is a significant risk factor, its impacts cannot be completely separated from the broader institutional and organisational environment in which social workers operate. Reflecting on these broader contexts can improve the interpretability of the results and, at the same

time, create space for a deeper understanding of how individual stressors accumulate and influence one another in practice.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study confirm that harassment by socially excluded clients is very common in the social work environment in the South Bohemian Region – and represents a serious problem affecting the daily practice of social workers. Workers are most often exposed to verbal attacks, humiliation, and threats, with the riskiest client groups being homeless people and people with addictions. The impacts of harassment are mainly reflected in workers' psychological health, reducing their motivation and increasing the risk of burnout. Although strategies for managing harassment include support from colleagues, regular supervision, and the use of institutional support, it turns out that support from organisations is not always sufficient.

This research aims to describe the manifestations of harassment and workers' reactions, which was achieved through a detailed analysis of the forms of harassment, coping strategies, and their effectiveness. The research questions focused on the forms of harassment, the reactions of workers, and the strategies used. They were answered on the basis of descriptive and statistical analyses. The results show that workers' reactions to harassment are individual and are influenced not only by the type of clientele but also by their professional experience and personal attitudes. A statistically significant difference was confirmed only in the use of assertive techniques when working with homeless people.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the practice consistently increase institutional support for social workers, regularly provide supervision, foster team cooperation, and provide education in the areas of crisis intervention and managing difficult client behaviour. Organisations should systematically create conditions for sharing experiences and support the development of workers' professional competencies. It is also appropriate to introduce clear methodological procedures and preventive measures to increase social workers' sense of security and satisfaction in their work.

### Ethics statement

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social work research. Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed in advance about the purpose of the research, the method of data processing, and that the data would be used only for scientific and professional purposes. Data collection was conducted via an anonymous online questionnaire that did not collect sensitive personal identification data. By completing the questionnaire, respondents expressed their informed consent to participate in the research. All data were processed in an anonymised form, and personal data protection was observed in accordance with the GDPR.

### Using generative AI

Generative artificial intelligence (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used to assist in formulating ideas and proofreading. All factual content, analysis, and conclusions are the work of the authors. The authors are fully responsible for the accuracy and truthfulness of all information provided in the article.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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