

Sources of Job Stress and General Health of Federal Legal Actors in a Municipality on Mexico's Northern Border

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ABSTRACT

Work stress is an important phenomenon in federal professional legal actors due to the constant confrontation with the labor demands of the judiciary and demands perceived as excessive or uncontrollable with overload of work, failure to meet strict deadlines, exposure to verbal violence and high complexity in the resolution of cases. Legal actors who present significant levels of work-related stress promote reactions and responses associated with general health such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, emotional exhaustion, insomnia, decreased satisfaction and inadequate professional performance, even with symptoms of Burnout syndrome. The objective of the study was to analyze the relation of sources of work-related stress on the overall health of federal legal actors in a border city in northern Mexico. A quantitative methodology was used with an empirical-analytical positivist approach with a non-experimental predictive design of cross-sectional temporality. 100 federal legal actors participated through a non-probabilistic sampling of voluntary subjects with informed consent. The ILO-WHO Work Stress Scale [1] and the GQH General Health Questionnaire [2] were applied by analyzing the data in the SPSS statistical program. It was concluded that the sources of work stress, such as organizational structure and climate, were strongly correlated between the dimensions themselves, showing an important correlation strength with the general health indicators of the legal actors, mainly with symptoms of anxiety and various physical discomforts.

KEYWORDS

Work stress, General health, Legal actors.

INTRODUCTION

Work-related stress is a problem that has gained relevance in recent years due to its increasing incidence and its negative effects on the general health of workers. In the context of the legal field, stress has become a determining factor that can affect both the professional performance and the personal well-being of legal actors. Judges, clerks, officers, actuaries, magistrates, and other professionals who, within a framework of federal law, interpret or apply legal norms within a nationwide legal system, constantly face high labor demands, pressure to meet strict deadlines, demanding schedules, and constantly updating norms and laws [3,4]. Not only one's own demands, but also situations of violence, insecurity, and overload in the judicial system can trigger high levels of stress that impact their physical and psychosocial health [5].

The Federal Judiciary is the branch of government charged with interpreting and enforcing laws at the national level. It is composed of various courts and administrative bodies, each with specific

functions. Federal legal actors act within the framework of national legislation and jurisdiction, above the state or local levels [6], with legal recognition and constitutional legitimacy [3], with the capacity to influence and participate in litigation, regulations, or the creation of public policies at the federal level [7], who interact with federal bodies, institutions such as Congress, the Supreme Court of Justice, or national regulatory agencies [8,9] and may be individuals or legal entities [10]. The situation in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, with constant exposure to violence and insecurity, creates a particularly stressful work environment for legal actors, as the added pressure of working in an environment where justice is often questioned can intensify work stress [11,12].

For Selye [13] stress is an adaptive physiological response and for Lazarus & Folkman [14] it is a perception that the demands of the environment exceed one's own resources for coping with internal or external stimuli called stressors. Stress is classified according to its duration as acute,



acute episodic or chronic stress; according to their impact on positive or negative stress, and according to their origin in academic, social, post-traumatic or work-related stress [15]. Work-related stress is linked to anxiety, depression, and *burnout syndrome*, characterized by physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion [16]. Professional burnout occurs more frequently in professions with high emotional demand, such as in the legal field, this being a clear example of how prolonged work stress negatively impacts the mental health of workers. For the authors, burnout is a condition following a process of professional burnout with factors such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of personal fulfillment [16]. The model of the demand for labor resources indicates that jobs with high demands and few resources increase stress and *burnout* [17,18]. It has been identified that significant levels of work-related stress have increased the likelihood of cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and alterations in the immune system [19].

On the international stage, Mexico is positioned among the countries with the highest prevalence of work-related stress, registering up to 27% of workers with chronic stress out of an average of 44% worldwide, affected workers report on average three negative consequences in their personal lives, which reflects the magnitude of this phenomenon and its influence on both individual well-being and organizational dynamics [20]. In Mexico, between 20% and 25% reported high levels of work-related stress that had an impact on their well-being and productivity according to the World Health Organization [WHO] [21,22]. 75% of workers in Mexico suffer from fatigue due to work stress, and more than 40% of those who perform desk work feel exhausted [23].

Although the official Mexican standard on psychosocial risk factors at work for their identification, analysis and prevention published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare [STPS] [24] under the name NOM-035-STP-2018 establishes guidelines to prevent psychosocial risks in all work environments by preventing work stress, it is estimated that 3 out of 4 employees present episodes of acute stress in their workplace. While about a quarter experience symptom chronically, which increases vulnerability to physical and psychological conditions [25]. Half of the workers report having faced daily stress in the last year, and 6 out of 10 perceive that their level of work tension has increased compared to previous years and 1 in 4 workers develop *burnout syndrome* [26]. The effects of stress transcend the workplace, as it is estimated that more than 80% of employees perceive repercussions in their personal lives, particularly in the quality of sleep, concentration and social relationships, in addition to 9 out of 10 recognizing that pressure and overload influence their decision to seek new employment opportunities [27]. It is therefore relevant as the objective of the study to analyze the relation of work-related stress on the general health of federal legal actors in Ciudad Juárez.

General health refers to the state of physical, emotional, psychological and social well-being of a person and not only the absence of diseases or diseases considering access to medical services, quality of life and protection against health risks [28]. Mental health involves an emotional and psychological balance that allows people to maintain a satisfactory and fulfilling life [29]. Physical health refers to the proper functioning of the body and the ability to perform daily activities without limitations [21]. It is estimated that 3.6% of the population suffers from anxiety disorders and 280 million suffer from depression as the main cause of global disability [22]. In Mexico, about 19% of workers reported symptoms of depression and 15% reported symptoms of anxiety related to persistent work stress [30]. Workplace well-being is related to several psychosocial factors, including the work environment, social support, workload and autonomy in tasks,

when these factors are negative or unbalanced, they can trigger work stress [31], with regular physical activity contributing significantly to general well-being, helping to prevent non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some types of cancer [22].

BACKGROUND

Castañeda et al. [32] and Díaz & Torres [33] pointed out that there are high levels of stress and mental health problems in legal professionals in Mexico. This phenomenon is associated with clinical consequences such as sleep disturbances, elevated blood pressure and increased body mass index, which increases the risk of chronic diseases. Work stress has been associated with a variety of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances negatively affecting quality of life and emotional well-being [34]. For Hahn et al. [35], excessive workload contributes to work stress in the work environment of legal actors, with tight deadlines and a high number of cases. Other findings showed that interpersonal conflicts due to the competitive nature of the legal field, not only in relation to defendant and plaintiff, but also between peers themselves, can lead to tensions and conflicts with colleagues and clients [36]. Social conflicts due to factors such as violence and corruption can also exacerbate anxiety [32]. Just as ambiguity in the role with a lack of clarity about expectations and responsibilities can generate uncertainty and stress [37].

A work environment that promotes well-being can considerably reduce the effects of stress and prevent mental health problems. Studies have shown that organizations that implement mental health policies and strategies for managing work-related stress, such as emotional management training, work flexibility, reducing excessive workload, and promoting social support, are more likely to keep their workers healthy and productive [38]. NOM-035-STPS-2018 also plays a key role in improving the well-being of workers by establishing preventive and corrective measures against work-related stress and psychosocial risks. This standard establishes that employers must implement measures to detect stress, promote a healthy work environment and offer support in situations of psychosocial risk, such as burnout or anxiety. The proper application of this standard can provide a solid basis for reducing the risks associated with stress and improving the mental health of federal legal actors [24].

It is of interest to the legal actors themselves, their superiors, including the federal government in question of the NOM-035-STPS-2018 standard that establishes procedures for the identification, analysis and prevention of psychosocial risk factors at work, to strengthen actions to achieve the objective of protecting the general health of workers. Work stress emerges as a problem taking into account the workload, the pressure in the resolution of complex cases and the demanding work environment. In addition, there are not enough previous studies that show us a relationship between work stress and general health within the legal field, which is why, in order to identify its causes, consequences and possible solutions, we propose measures that favor their well-being and optimal performance in the functions of Mexican jurists. It was hypothesized that the high level of work stress presented by the federal legal actors in Ciudad Juárez has a predictive force of significant impact on their general health. Therefore, the research was guided by the following question: What is the relation strength of work stress on the general health of federal legal actors in Ciudad Juárez?

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative methodology was used with an empirical-analytical

positivist approach with a non-experimental predictive design of cross-sectional temporality. Quantitative methodology is characterized by the use of structured procedures, numerical measurement, and statistical analysis in order to test hypotheses and establish causal relationships between variables [39]. The empirical analytical positivist approach consists of the search for objective explanations of social reality through observation and empirical verification; this approach is based on the assumption that phenomena can be measured, predicted, and generalized, and that the researcher must maintain neutrality to avoid bias [40]. The predictive non-experimental research design implies that variables are not deliberately manipulated, but rather observed in their natural context to analyze their causal relationship and anticipate future behaviors or trends. Its purpose is to establish statistical associations that allow predicting the values of one variable from others [41]. Cross-sectional temporality refers to the fact that data are collected at a single time or specific period, with the aim of describing phenomena or analyzing the relationship between variables at a specific time, without monitoring the same subjects over time [42].

100 federal legal actors participated in Ciudad Juárez through a non-probabilistic sampling of voluntary subjects with informed consent. First, institutional permits were obtained to conduct the research. Then, the legal actors who wished to participate were voluntarily invited through the selection of inclusion criteria of belonging to the Judicial Branch of the Federation of Ciudad Juárez, excluding security or cleaning personnel, with at least one year of work experience in their current position. An informed consent was then read and provided, ensuring that they understand the objective of the study, confidentiality, counting on their voluntary participation and the right to privacy. Once the actors accepted their participation, the instruments were applied.

A sociodemographic questionnaire was applied in addition to the ILO-WHO Occupational Stress Scale developed by Ivancevich & Matteson [1] with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability of $\alpha=0.966$, with a duration of 10 to 15 minutes. It consists of 25 ordinal items in Likert scaling from 1 to 5 in the direction of frequency, to assess the intensity of the symptoms of work stress and the sources of psychosocial risks in the work environment, in various areas: (1) Organizational climate with items 1, 10, 11 and 20; (2) Organizational structure with items 2, 12, 16 and 24; (3) Organizational territory with items 3, 15 and 22; (4) Technology with items 4, 14 and 25; (5) Influence of the leader with items 5, 6, 13 and 17; (6) Lack of cohesion with items 7, 9, 18 and 21; and (7) Group support with items 8, 19 and 23. It is assessed by adding the items of each area to identify the degree of intensity of the symptoms of work stress and the sources of risk. In area 1, scores between 4 and 28 represent risk in organizational climate. In area 2, scores between 4 and 28 represent risk in organizational structure. In area 3, scores from 3 to 21 represent risk in organizational territory. In area 4, scores from 3 to 21 represent risk in technology. In area 5, scores from 4 to 28 represent risk in the influence of the leader. In area 6 scores from 4 to 28 represent risk in lack of cohesion. In area 7, scores from 3 to 21 represent risk in support of the group.

Likewise, the GHQ General Health Questionnaire developed by Goldberg [2] was applied with a reliability of $\alpha=0.89$, with a duration of 5 to 10 minutes. It consists of 28 ordinal items in Likert scaling from 0 to 3 in the sense of affirmation, which identifies general health in the degree of appearance or severity of psychic and physical symptoms, ability to perform normal healthy functions and appearance of new phenomena or psychic discomfort. It is divided into four sections to identify: (1) Somatic symptoms with items 1 to 7. (2) Anxiety -8 to 14-, (3) Social dysfunction -15 to 21-, (4) Depression from 22 to 28.

Options 1 and 2 are interpreted as no presence of symptoms (zero) and options 3 and 4 are interpreted as presence (one). Scores greater than 5 and 6, with a maximum of 7 in either category representing greater symptoms. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences [SPSS] using descriptive, differential, and predictive tests.

RESULTS

With a mean age of $x=39.9$ ($SD=9.7$), with a minimum age of 24 and a maximum age of 58, 100 legal actors participated, 53% (53) women and 47% (47) men. 7% reported being actuaries, 69% officers, 10% secretaries, 9% project secretaries and 5% private secretaries. The descriptive results show that the different dimensions that make up the sources of work-related stress present moderate levels among the participants. In particular, organizational climate ($M = 10.59$, $SD = 5.41$), organizational structure ($M = 11.28$, $SD = 5.12$), technology ($M = 11.36$, $SD = 4.84$), and leader influence ($M = 9.78$, $SD = 4.92$) reflect average perceptions of stress in these areas. On the other hand, organizational territory ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 3.46$) and group support ($M = 6.97$, $SD = 4.44$) are located at relatively lower levels, suggesting that these dimensions generate less tension compared to the others. The total score of sources of work-related stress ($M = 66.63$, $SD = 25.98$) indicates an overall level of moderate stress, with considerable variability among workers.

As for general health, assessed by the General Health Questionnaire, the results show low levels of psychological distress. The total score ($M = 6.82$, $SD = 7.07$) reflects the presence of mild symptoms in the sample. Specifically, somatic symptoms ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 2.81$) and anxiety ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 3.00$) show moderate levels, while social dysfunction ($M = 1.22$, $SD = 1.66$) and depression ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.83$) show low levels, indicating that most participants maintain adequate daily functioning and have few depressive indicators.

The correlation results show a positive and significant relationship between sources of work stress and general health ($r = .252$, $p = .012$). This indicates that, as the sources of work-related stress increase, the general psychological distress of the participants also tends to increase. When analyzing the specific dimensions of health, it is observed that work stress is significantly related to somatic symptoms ($r = .251$, $p = .012$) and anxiety ($r = .268$, $p = .007$). This suggests that workers who experience higher levels of work-related stress tend to report more physical discomfort and anxiety symptoms. In contrast, no significant associations were found between work stress and social dysfunction ($r = .103$, $p = .306$) or depression ($r = .117$, $p = .245$), indicating that these areas do not seem to be directly affected by work stress in this sample.

CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained allow us to affirm that the sources of work stress present a significant correlation with the general health of federal legal actors, which is consistent with the main theoretical frameworks and antecedents reviewed. From the classical perspective, Selye [13] proposed that continuous exposure to stressors generates physiological reactions that, over time, deteriorate physical and psychological well-being. This approach is confirmed in the present research, especially when observing increases in somatic symptoms and anxiety among those who report higher levels of work stress. The relation of sources of work-related stress and the general health effects on federal legal actors in Ciudad Juárez was relevant and significant. According to Arellano [20], organizational dynamics cause stress and health alterations in legal actors.

Lazarus & Folkman [14] pointed out that stress arises when the

person perceives that the demands of the environment exceed his coping resources. In the case of federal legal actors, the pressure for deadlines, the volume of work, and exposure to contexts of violence—particularly marked in Ciudad Juárez, according to Cruz [11]—generate a sustained perception of high demands that coincides with this model. Likewise, Karasek's [17] approach to the Demand-Control model and the expansion of the Demand-Resources model by Bakker et al. [18] reinforce that jobs with high demands and limited resources increase the probability of psychological tension, a finding aligned with the correlation found between work stress and general health.

In the legal field, various previous studies have shown that this profession is especially vulnerable to developing stress and health effects. Research such as that by Castañeda et al. [32], Martínez [8] and Díaz & Torres [33] has documented symptoms of emotional exhaustion, anxiety and physical discomfort in lawyers and operators of the judicial system, which coincides with the dimensions affected in this study. Shaw [36] also highlighted that interpersonal conflicts and the competitive nature of this environment accentuate daily tension, while Hahn et al. [35] underlined the impact of overload and strict times as critical stressors.

In epidemiological terms, international organizations such as the WHO [22] and the APA [25] have warned that work-related stress contributes to the deterioration of mental health and the increase in physical illnesses, visible trends in the population studied. At the national level, Mexico is among the countries with the highest prevalence of work-related stress [20] and legal professionals are not exempt from this reality. The presence of somatic symptoms and anxiety coincides with national reports on affectations related to psychosocial risks [30,5].

Although NOM-035-STPS-2018 establishes guidelines to prevent psychosocial risk factors [24], the findings indicate that working conditions persist that generate a negative impact on the general health of workers in the federal legal field. This shows the need to strengthen institutional strategies aimed at the prevention, detection and care of occupational stress, as well as the promotion of healthy work environments. In summary, the data analyzed confirm that work-related stress has a significant relation with the general health, particularly in physical symptoms and anxiety, which is supported by the theoretical stress models and the empirical background reviewed. These results underscore the importance of implementing organizational interventions and psychological support programs that protect the well-being of federal legal actors and favor sustainable professional performance.

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