




# Social Work Professionals Functioning during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Occupational Risks and their Socio-psychological Consequences

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**Abstract:** At the present stage of social development, human activities are increasingly described in categories of occupational risk. The problem of occupational risks in workers' (professionals') activities, the social and psychological consequences of risks are increasingly looked into scientifically. Researchers focus on analysing the ways the external and internal (personal) factors affect the occurrence of occupational risks in the professionals' activities. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, this issue has gained particular importance due to the socio-psychological consequences it entails for service users and social workers, employees of social protection departments.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected all countries and regions of the world to a greater or lesser extent. The spread of the coronavirus pandemic is characterized not only by its negative medical and demographic consequences, but also has social and psychological consequences for the entire population.


With the spread of the pandemic, the role of the social protection system has increased considerably. The International Labor Organization (ILO) emphasizes in its analytical materials for 2020 that the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic can be mitigated by strengthening the social protection system in all countries. Currently, 126 countries, including Russia, have implemented and adapted social protection programs or policies proceeding responsive to COVID-19.


As the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to spread, socially vulnerable segments of the Russian population are increasing in numbers, wanting not only medical, but also social assistance.


In this regard, the role of personnel rendering social services and assistance has significantly increased – social work professionals, social workers, as well as volunteers who assist socially vulnerable groups of the population in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Amadasun, 2020).

During the coronavirus pandemic, elderly disabled people, persons with disabilities are especially at risk; children at risk include unsupervised minors and those living in socially disadvantaged families; people living in residential boarding institutions of social services (boarding homes for the elderly and disabled, psycho-neurological boarding schools, etc.); maladjusted adults (persons in crisis centers, centers of social adaptation), etc. are also exposed (Heather, 2020).

Representatives of vulnerable groups of the population are subject to an objectively greater risk of contracting the coronavirus infection compared to other groups of the population, but at the same time they have much less opportunity to successfully cope with the current life situation. Compared to other groups of the population, vulnerable categories more

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often face problems accessing social and medical services, information, which results in increased social exclusion. In addition, they suffer social stigma, which manifests itself in bias, discrimination and segregation resultant from the risks (actual and perceived) of spreading coronavirus infection (Martinez, 2020).

The spread of the coronavirus pandemic in Russia requires an analysis of workers' activities under the prevailing conditions, including the occupational activities of social work professionals (Devlieghere and Roose, 2020).

Occupational activity in the context of the coronavirus pandemic can be considered as functioning in an emergency. When analyzing the emergency phenomenon, researchers focus on the following aspects: an individual as a subject in an emergency (L. I. Antsiferova, B. S. Bratus, V. I. Lebedev, G. Yu. Fomenko and others); socio-psychological determinations of an emergency affecting an individual (L. D. Pravdina, O. S. Shiryaeva); impacts of psychogenic factors on an individual under emergency conditions and effects of emergency on a person's professional activity (M. Sh. Magomed-Eminov), etc. In particular, looking into the phenomenon of emergency, M. Sh. Magomed-Eminov argues that extreme conditions stand for specific, modified conditions and factors imposing higher or ultimate requirements for the individual's occupational activity; stressors worsening a person's performance, undermining health, causing post-traumatic reactions and disorders (Magomed-Eminov, 2010).

In their performance, social work professionals are involved in long-term intense communication with people experiencing disadvantage and stress, which often leads to physical and mental exhaustion and poses the occupational risks.

To date, a reliable evidence base has been accumulated confirming that performance with increased labor intensity, necessity to rapidly adapt professionally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, responsibility to resolve the vital problems of social service recipients adversely affect the health and occupational activities of social work professionals. In particular, this is further aggravated by information overload (Malik and Melkaya, 2018), time restricted for every recipient of social services, professional responsibility for the life and health of recipients of social services (Fink, 2019), prolonged mental stress caused by difficult working conditions and a high level of professional stress (Solomonidou and Katsounari, 2020) that leads to burnout syndrome (Hlavatska, 2019), (Tuğsal, 2020), (Chen, 2021).

The phenomenon of risk is the subject matter of interdisciplinary research; in modern scientific discourse it is considered as a complex concept that covers the likelihood of adverse consequences and assesses the extent of these consequences (Mythen, 2004).

In our study, risk is considered as a subjective category associated with the ways a social work professional assesses behavior strategies and consciously chooses possible behavioral alternatives, taking into account professional activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and possible socio-psychological consequences.

Occupational risk is considered by researchers as a type of social risk entailed by the performance of occupational duties, for example, the activities of social work professionals, psychologists and other specialists in care-giving sector (Volkova, 2016), (Jo and Choi, 2021), (Kinman and Grant, 2020).

The nature and specificity of activities characteristic of social work professionals explain the emergence and development of occupational risks, since while interacting with recipients of social services, the social worker exploits not only their professional skills and abilities, but also part of his personal resources, such as emotions, feelings, empathy, etc. Beyond this, there may be difficult situations in the private life of social workers and challenges in their work (for example, the COVID-19 pandemic), work with a much larger number of recipients of social services and their families, a high level of moral responsibility, etc. All this may adversely affect the professional motivation of a specialist, bring about disappointment in the profession itself, cause various personality deformations, and often lead to emotional burnout (Krivtsova and Martynova, 2019), (Chen 2020).

Thus, the performance of a social work professional is linked with factors of increased occupational risk (external and internal, i.e., personal).

The analysis of factors affecting occupational risks and assessment of socio-psychological consequences of these risks for social work professionals' performance during the COVID-19 pandemic are complicated by the insufficient development of methods and tools for conducting such studies.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological basis for the study of occupational risks in social work professionals'

performance includes risk concepts (A. M. Molokostova, O. N. Yanitskiy, T. V. Bendas, and others); the concept of professional activities (E. I. Kholostova, T. S. Bazarov et al.); approaches to studying professional activities in extreme (emergency) situations (M. Sh. Magomed-Eminov).

To conduct the study, we developed a methodology applying a questionnaire survey and psychodiagnostic research which allows to identify and quantify social factors and causes of occupational risks, taking into account the analysis of social work professionals' performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative and quantitative analysis allowed to assess the scope (degree) of the severity of risks associated with activities of social work professionals.

The logic of the study implied a theoretical analysis of the activities of the subjects, i.e. social work professionals, the subsequent identification of factors and causes of occupational risks during the spread of coronavirus infection and the assessment of the socio-psychological consequences caused by them.

The study was conducted on the basis of organizations (institutions) of social services catering for the population of the city of Kemerovo and Kemerovo region in 2020 and early 2021 with the participation of social work professionals (97 respondents). The study used the following methods: the survey method (the authors' version of the questionnaire survey); the testing method using standardized psychodiagnostic techniques such as "Ways of Coping Questionnaire" (R. Lazarus and S. Folkman, as adapted by T. L. Kryukova, E. V. Kuftyak, M. S. Zamyshlyeva); questionnaire "Diagnostics of the level of emotional burnout" (V. V. Boyko); questionnaire "Organizational Stress Scale" (McLean).

A questionnaire survey of subjects, namely social work professionals, was carried out with a view to identifying the influence of occupational risk factors, their manifestations and impacts on employees during their professional activities in the COVID-19 pandemic. When analyzing the reasons for the professional risks to occur in the activities of social workers, we assessed the influence of such factors as behaviour strategies demonstrated by this category of workers (ways of coping with professional situations), motivation for professional activity and the value of this activity for them, the communication skill level, the severity of emotional burnout and organizational stress tolerance (stress resistance).

The results from the empirical study were processed statistically: identifying differences in the

average levels of signs (Student's t-test), conducting correlation analysis (Pearson's linear correlation).

### 3 RESEARCH RESULTS

As a result of the study, we characterized the activities of social work professionals from social service organizations (institutions) catering for the population, taking into account the occupational risks arising from working during the coronavirus pandemic.

The activities of social work professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic are linked with the following functions:

- *promotional functions*, i.e. coordinating the work of interagency and interdisciplinary networks to develop and promote practices and standards for the provision of social services to the population during a pandemic;
- *monitoring function*, i.e. providing and adhering to protocols to ensure the safety of the personnel of social service institutions during the coronavirus pandemic;
- *response functions*, i.e. case management in conditions of increased social isolation of citizens, as an important component of professional social services (assessing the disadvantage, planning assistance, redirecting social services, providing psychosocial assistance in a situation of loss of loved ones or after recovery from the coronavirus infection); providing mutual assistance and support in the professional community (organizational, methodological, practical and moral);
- *preventive functions*, i.e. identifying the needs of the population and workers themselves (social work professionals) caused by the coronavirus pandemic; assessing the occurrence of occupational risks and timely response to emerging problems, etc.

It has been established that the severity of occupational risks and their impact (socio-psychological consequences) on the activities of social work professionals during the coronavirus pandemic depend on both the external social factors (age, work experience in the field, relevant education and training in social work, etc.) and the internal, socio-psychological factors linked with this activity (behaviour strategies, motivation and value of professional activity for the employee, the communication skill level, the intensity of emotional burnout, etc.).

We assessed the severity of occupational risk through a comprehensive analysis of risk indicators. The social work professionals who participated in the

study were asked to rate the likelihood of each occupational risk indicator that might hinder professional activities during the COVID-19 pandemic on a five-point scale.

Table 1 presents the ways the social work professionals assessed the impact which the factors (external and intrapersonal) of occupational risk made on their activity due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Table 1: Social work professionals' assessment for the impact of occupational risk factors and their indicators on professional activity during the coronavirus pandemic.

Factor rate	External factors affecting the occurrence of occupational risk	Intrapersonal factors affecting the occurrence of occupational risk
1	Poor health	Prolonged mental stress due to difficult working conditions
2	Low wages meeting only basic needs	Feeling emotionally drained and empty
3	Increased expenses for maintaining children and relatives in the social worker's family	Conflict situations arising with recipients of social services
4	Decline in the occupational prestige	Interacting with people in emergency (for example, those affected by the pandemic, suffering the loss of loved ones after these traumatic events)
5	Need to balance between professional activities and caring for an elderly or disabled family member, a disabled child, etc.	Constant work with people in difficult life situations, which worsens their vital functions and livelihoods
6	Need to care for young children and bring them up	Conflict situations arising with relatives of recipients of social services
7	Social work professional's age	Increased labour intensity
8		Monotony in their work routine
9		Routine nature of their occupational activities
10		Fear of losing their job
11		Difficulties in implementing their professional plans, building a career

## 4 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The data presented in Table 1 show that the following indicators of external factors have the greatest impact on the occurrence of occupational risks in social work professionals' activities during the coronavirus pandemic: the unsatisfactory state of health of the social worker; low wages; an increase in expenses for the maintenance of children and loved ones in the social worker's own family; decrease in the prestige of the profession. According to experts, the most significant indicators of intrapersonal factors of the occurrence of professional risk include: mental stress caused by difficult working conditions; a feeling of emotional exhaustion and emptiness as a result of difficult working conditions; conflict situations arising from the interaction of specialists with recipients of social services; work with people affected by the pandemic and / or surviving the loss of loved ones during these traumatic events.

At the next stage, we conducted a study that allowed us to identify the impact of external and internal factors on the occurrence of occupational risks. It was achieved by a questionnaire survey and standardized psychodiagnostic techniques ("Ways of Coping Questionnaire" by R. Lazarus and S. Folkman, adapted by T. L. Kryukova, E. V. Kuftyak, M. S. Zamyshlyayeva; questionnaire "Diagnostics of the level of emotional burnout" by V. V. Boyko; questionnaire "Organizational Stress Scale" by McLean).

Correlation analysis revealed the following. The severity of occupational risk depends on: excessive rationality, lack of emotionality, intuition and spontaneity in behaviour (0.24); lower material welfare (-0.35); unfounded self-criticism and taking on excessive responsibility (-0.24); underestimation of the possible effective resolution of a problem situation (-0.29); the desire to protect oneself from unpleasant impressions (0.25).

One of the reasons for the occupational risk to occur is a decreased prestige of the profession, which is influenced by: a narrowing range of interests for a social worker (-0.23), a social worker's activity and productivity (-0.24); underestimation of the possible effective resolution of a problem situation (-0.22); high stress level during professional duties performance (0.24); dissatisfaction with oneself, the chosen profession, the position held and specific duties (0.27); inadequate emotional reaction to recipients of social services and colleagues (0.37); lack of desire for close communication with loved

ones (0.21) and a drop in the general energy tone and depletion of the nervous system (0.22).

Excessive self-control (0.24), evasion of responsibility and actions to resolve difficulties encountered, passivity, impatience, tantrums (0.28); the likelihood of excessive rationality, lack of emotionality, intuition and spontaneity in behaviour negatively affect health indicators and increase the social risk. In addition, the severity of occupational risk correlates with the desire for pragmatism, the search for specific benefits from professional activity; impulsivity in behaviour (sometimes with elements of hostility and conflict), hostility, difficulties in planning actions, predicting their results, unjustified persistence (0.25); lack of empathy or compassion.

The severity of professional risk depends on a number of personal factors: low level of activity and productivity of one's life (-0.26), exclusion of emotions from the sphere of professional activity (0.21); increasing awareness of the psycho-traumatic factors of professional activity, which are difficult or impossible to avoid, which results not only in an increased risk, but also in irritation, despair and indignation (0.21); fulfilment of their professional duties and manifestation of emotions depending on the mood and attitude towards a person as a symptom of emotional and moral disorientation (0.23). Working with various recipients of social services, including people who have suffered accidents, technological disasters, industrial accidents; natural disasters, tragedies, etc., as well as people who have lost their loved ones during these traumatic events, social work professionals are likely to lose interest in the subjects of their professional activity – the latter may burden with their problems, their presence is difficult to tolerate (0.24). An increased level of occupational risk is affected by: nonconstructive forms of behaviour in stressful situations (denial or ignorance of problems, overeating, etc.) (-0.2); low tolerance (-0.23); no need to seek recommendations from experts and acquaintances who have necessary expertise, no need for emotional support, no desire to share their experiences with significant people (-0.26); lack of responsibility (-0.23).

In addition, occupational risk level is increased by complete dissolution in another person (0.23), rigid behaviour (-0.22), impulsivity in behaviour, hostility, difficulties in planning actions, predicting their results, correcting behaviour strategies, unjustified persistence (0.26); low value of professional activity (-0.2); emotional callousness, impoliteness, indifference (0.27), narrowed sphere of interests (-0.21); low material welfare (-0.21); overcoming negative experiences at the expense of a subjective

decrease in the significance and extent of emotional involvement (0.22); suppression and containment of emotions (0.22); excessive rationality (0.26); excessive emotional involvement (-0.26) and, at the same time, excessive mental perception and processing of external information (0.2).

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the empirical study, we made the following conclusions:

1. There is a pronounced relationship between the severity of occupational risks and their factors. The risk level for social work professionals is associated with a number of personal factor indicators:

- ability to communicate, to adequately assess a situation;
- commitment to the fullest realization of one's abilities in professional activity, to joint activities with colleagues, to building favourable relationships with them;
- absence of a professional burnout symptom;
- availability of numerous coping strategies: self-control, seeking social support, taking responsibility, planning problem solving and positive reevaluation.

The low level of occupational risks in the social work professionals' activities during the coronavirus pandemic is manifested in the ability to communicate, adequately assess the professional situation; commitment to the fullest realization of one's abilities in professional activity, to joint activities with colleagues, to building favourable relationships with them; the absence of a professional burnout symptom; using adaptive coping strategies (self-control, seeking social support, taking responsibility, planning for problem solving, and positive reevaluation).

A high level of occupational risks among professionals is characterized by stress; limited professional activity, conservatism in implementing professional tasks; a professional burnout symptom; using ineffective coping strategies of behaviour (confrontational coping, distancing and escape-avoidance).

2. It was found out that the level of occupational risks has different dynamics depending on the fact whether social work professionals have specialized education and work experience or not. A high level of occupational risk was detected in young specialists with work experience under 5 years; and in specialists with relevant education and training (which is confirmed by the correlation analysis). The level of occupational risk decreases with the age of

professionals. At the same time, it was noted that occupational risk is more likely to appear in professionals who have worked in a social service institution for 11 to 15 years, i.e. having considerable work experience in institutions of this type.

Occupational risks during the coronavirus pandemic lead to professional deformation of the professional's personality, which is conditioned by both external and internal factors. External factors, such as low financing for organizations of social protection of the population, inadequate remuneration for labour, etc., are difficult to correct. The influence of internal (personal) factors can be minimized, adjusted through risk management, while using preventive methods that will allow professionals to effectively cope with occupational activities and fully function in their own life.

Occupational risk assessment allows to correctly identify hazards, make decisions and effectively allocate the resources of the organization and the individual. The efficiency of occupational activities of social work professionals can be improved and the harmful effects of the coronavirus pandemic can be reduced by following measures: taking into account the specific character of work in an emergency during the spread of coronavirus infection; emergency management; using prevention methods for the formation of psychological and emotional resistance to occupational risks in employees; improving the qualifications of employees, etc.

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