

# Job Stress and Working Conditions Ireland in Comparative Perspective

Helen Russell, Bertrand Maître, Dorothy Watson  
and Éamonn Fahey

SERIES NUMBER 84  
MARCH 2019

This document is a  
summary of the ESRI  
report. The full report is  
available to download at  
[www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)



## Summary

---

### **Job stress and working conditions: Ireland in comparative perspective**

**An analysis of the European Working Conditions  
Survey**

Helen Russell  
Bertrand Maître  
Dorothy Watson  
Éamonn Fahey



## Table of Contents

---

About this report.....	4
Why is this report necessary? .....	4
How was this report completed? .....	5
What were the main findings? .....	7
What are the main recommendations? .....	8
Where can I get further information? .....	8

## About this report

This report is a summary of the longer document *Job Stress and working conditions: Ireland in comparative perspective*. It examines the levels of job stress in Ireland in 2015 and trends in the five years from 2010 to 2015. It also aims to identify the factors that make some jobs more stressful than others.

The main research questions asked in the study are:

- What was the level of job stress in Ireland in 2015 and how has this changed since 2010? How do levels of job stress in Ireland compare to other countries in Western Europe?
- What are the main characteristics of jobs that are associated with higher stress? Are these the same in Ireland and the UK?
- Which sectors and occupations show the highest levels of job stress, and what is it that makes them more stressful than other sectors and occupations?
- How can the findings of this study help to reduce job stress levels in the future?

## Why is this report necessary?

Stress in the workplace is an issue of growing concern. It is becoming well recognised in the world of work that job stress can have a significant effect on workers' physical and mental wellbeing.

The changing nature of work from industrial production to services means that employees are increasingly exposed to psychological, rather than physical, demands. Health and Safety legislation in Ireland specifies that employers have a duty of care to ensure that the safety, health and welfare of employees is not unreasonably compromised by their work. As well as ensuring workers' physical safety, this duty of care includes safeguarding the mental health of workers.

Job stress also carries economic costs – for example, the cost to the overall economy in terms of work absence, sickness benefits and health services costs. In addition to these, there are other indirect financial and non-financial costs of job stress, such as negative effects on family life and personal relationships, poor professional relationships at work, and high job turnover.

It is important, therefore, to examine and analyse job stress trends and patterns with a view to improving worker health and wellbeing.

## How was this report completed?

### The information we used:

For this study, we analysed information gathered by the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). This survey is managed by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. It was launched in 1990 and, since then, it has been carried out every five years.

We analysed information from the two most recent surveys – 2010 and 2015. Samples ranging in size from 1,000 to 3,000 were taken in each country, and workers aged 15 and over who had worked in the week before the survey was conducted were the target group.

We consider the EWCS survey information to be a rich source of relevant information on job stress, as it provides information on aspects of working life that are highly relevant to this report, such as:

- job demands,
- working conditions – such as hours,
- job resources, and
- stress reactions.

Also, because the EWCS is Europe-wide, it allows us to draw comparisons with other countries. We looked at the Irish information in relation to nine other western European countries to compare patterns and identify trends. We particularly focused on comparisons with the UK, where employment culture and legislation are very similar to our own.

### How we measured job stress:

We use two pieces of information from the EWCS survey to measure job stress.

1. Answers to a question on how often workers feel stressed in their work, and
2. Information on whether workers have experienced a range stress reactions, namely disturbed sleep, anxiety, and fatigue.

For this report, we combined the information to give a more reliable picture of job stress. If a worker answered that they felt stressed at work 'always' or 'most of the time' and reported that they suffered at least one stress reaction (disturbed sleep, anxiety or fatigue), we categorised that worker as experiencing job stress. Using the information in this way reduces the risk that we pick up stress reactions that are caused by something outside of work.

## What were the main findings?

We found that job stress in Ireland more than doubled between 2010 and 2015. In the 2010 survey, 8% of workers experienced job stress compared to 17% in the 2015 survey. Whereas the Irish figures were below average for both years when compared to nine other western European countries, Ireland was one of the countries showing the steepest increase in job stress between 2010 and 2015. In relation to the other research questions, the main findings were as follows:

- In Ireland, by far the strongest predictor of job stress among employees was the level of emotional demands in the job. The emotional demands measure consists of two items - dealing with angry clients, customers, pupils and so on and having to hide feelings at work. Those with the highest scores in emotional demands were 21 times more likely to experience job stress than those with the lowest scores in emotional demands. Emotional demands were strongly linked with service work, and were found to be particularly high in the Hospitality sector and Health sectors.
- The second, third and fourth strongest predictors of job stress were:
  - o being under time pressure,
  - o being exposed to bullying, harassment or other forms of poor treatment, and
  - o being under-rewarded in relation to work effort.
- High physical demands were also significantly associated with higher job stress when we considered workers in Ireland and the UK together.
- There was no significant link between job stress and job security.
- Workers in the Health sector, Public Administration, and the Manufacturing sectors experienced the highest levels of job stress.
- Workers in the Construction and Retail sectors reported the lowest levels of job stress.
- Across sectors, managers, technical and other professionals experienced the highest levels of job stress. For managers this was related to high levels of time pressure and long hours.

## What are the main recommendations?

For Government, future policy should focus on preventing excessive work stress given the worrying increase in job stress figures between 2010 and 2015. Continued supports to help employers identify and manage the risks highlighted in this report are also a priority. Information and supports can also be targeted at high-risk sectors and jobs.

For employers, plans and policies should be developed to prevent and manage job stress. This includes policies to address bullying, harassment and exposure to violence and aggression in the workplace.

Further research should be undertaken to examine the long-term health effects of job stress.

## Where can I get more information?

You can get the full version of this document at: [www.hsa.ie/eng/publications\\_and\\_forms/publications/research\\_publications/](http://www.hsa.ie/eng/publications_and_forms/publications/research_publications/)

The full version of the study gives more detailed information on the causes and levels of job stress across employment sectors and occupations. It also gives more detailed comparisons between Ireland and western European countries – in particular the UK.

There are also other relevant Health and Safety Authority publications available to download free from the HSA website [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

Among these is ‘Work-related Stress – a guide for Employers’, which individuals and organisations might find useful when developing policies and plans for job stress prevention, intervention and management.

The direct link for this download is [www.hsa.ie/eng/publications\\_and\\_forms/publications/occupational\\_health/work\\_related\\_stress\\_a\\_guide\\_for\\_employers.html](http://www.hsa.ie/eng/publications_and_forms/publications/occupational_health/work_related_stress_a_guide_for_employers.html)









*healthy,  
safe and  
productive  
lives*

**Health and Safety  
Authority**

**Tel. 1890 289 389**

International  
Callers

00353 1 614 7000

[www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

**March 2019**  
**Research series**  
**Number 84**

Available to download from  
[www.esri.ie](http://www.esri.ie)

© The Economic and Social  
Research Institute

Whitaker Square, Sir John  
Rogerson's Quay, Dublin 2

DOI <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs84>



This Open Access work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly credited.

