

Impact of legal guarantees on the mental health of law enforcement officers of Ukraine in the conditions of conducting military (combat) actions

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the legal guarantees for Ukrainian law enforcement officers performing their official duties in areas of military (combat) operations, and their impact on the preservation of mental and physical health. The research also aims to identify the relationship between the level of implementation of these guarantees, psycho-emotional state, occupational stress, and the risks of burnout among this category of personnel.

Materials and Methods: The study was designed as an interdisciplinary empirical legal study combining legal, medico-social, and statistical methods. It included comparative legal analysis, an anonymous survey, and statistical processing of the data. The study involved 48 law enforcement officers with experience of service in combat zones or other high-risk conditions. The main research instrument was an adapted questionnaire assessing psychological competencies and the perception of legal guarantees.

Results: The respondents highly rated the importance of psychological competencies for professional communication, while self-assessment of communicative skills was moderately high. At the same time, indicators of stress prevention, perception of legal guarantees, legal certainty, maladaptive behaviour risks, and mental health remained at an average level. The lowest scores were related to access to psychological assistance and access to rest and rotation. Correlation analysis showed that stronger legal guarantees were associated with lower occupational stress, while greater legal certainty was linked to better self-assessed mental health. Insufficient legal guarantees were significantly associated with emotional burnout.

Conclusions: Legal guarantees for law enforcement personnel in combat conditions should be regarded not only as a formal element of service status, but also as a practical mechanism for preserving mental and physical health. Strengthening legal certainty, improving access to psychological and medical support, and ensuring effective rest and rotation mechanisms are essential for reducing stress and burnout and for enhancing professional resilience.

KEY WORDS: legal guarantees; mental health; combat conditions

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INTRODUCTION

Ensuring the rights of Ukrainian law enforcement officers who perform their official duties in areas of military (combat) operations is a crucial condition for preserving their mental and physical health. Under such circumstances, the activities of Ukrainian law enforcement agencies are carried out under an increased risk to life, significant emotional strain, severe time constraints for decision-making, and the need for constant interaction with victims, witnesses, civilians, and military personnel [1, 2]. Therefore, the legal guarantees for Ukrainian law enforcement officers should be considered not only as an element of their official status but also as a factor in the prevention of occupational stress, burnout, and mental health disorders.

The constitutional basis for such an approach is the right to life and the right to health protection. According

to Articles 27 and 49 of the Constitution of Ukraine, the state is obliged to ensure the protection of human life and create conditions for health protection, medical assistance, and rehabilitation [3]. During military (combat) operations, these provisions must have practical significance for Ukrainian law enforcement officers and encompass safe conditions of service, unimpeded access to medical and psychological assistance, rest, rotations, legal briefings, and mechanisms for responding to violations of legal guarantees [4, 5].

Legal certainty takes on particular importance under these conditions. A Ukrainian law enforcement officer is simultaneously a bearer of constitutional rights and an entity endowed with authoritative powers. This duality is particularly evident during operational-search measures (OSM) and covert investigative (search) actions

(CISA) in areas of military (combat) operations, where the necessity for a lawful, rapid, and proportionate response is coupled with an elevated risk of operational, procedural, or disciplinary evaluation of their actions. Ukrainian legislation on operational-search activities [6, 7] and the criminal procedural regulation of covert investigative (search) actions [7–10] establish the legal grounds and limits for such measures. However, a lack of clarity regarding procedures, the boundaries of lawful decisions for their execution, or potential legal consequences can exacerbate anxiety and occupational stress among Ukrainian law enforcement officers in areas of military (combat) operations.

In this context, the implementation of the strategic directions for reforming Ukraine's law enforcement system is of great importance. These directions are enshrined, in particular, in the Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 273/2023 of May 11, 2023 [11] and the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 792-r of August 23, 2024 [12], which stipulate the improvement of the legal and regulatory framework for the activities of Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, the enhancement of the legal certainty of their functioning, and the provision of appropriate legal and social guarantees for Ukrainian law enforcement officers within the framework of Ukraine's integration into the European Union. These provisions hold conceptual significance for establishing a proper system of legal guarantees for Ukrainian law enforcement officers while they perform their assigned duties in areas of military (combat) operations.

The violation or insufficient implementation of legal guarantees under such conditions can negatively impact the mental and physical health of Ukrainian law enforcement officers. A lack of psychological support, the stigmatization of seeking help, excessive workload, disruption of rest regimens, a shortage of protective equipment, and the uncertainty of the legal boundaries of official actions increase the risk of emotional exhaustion, professional deformation, sleep disorders, somatic complaints, and maladaptive forms of coping with stress [13, 14].

Modern international standards confirm that an employee's mental health is a component of a safe professional environment. The World Health Organization's guidelines on mental health at work emphasize the need for organizational measures, training, support, and the early detection of risks [15]. The standards of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime/World Health Organization focus on evidence-based preventive approaches to risky behavior [16], while the documents of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization highlight the importance of psychological support

for personnel throughout the entire cycle of task execution [17].

At the same time, the scientific literature lacks a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between the legal guarantees of the rights of Ukrainian law enforcement officers in areas of military (combat) operations, the legal certainty of operational-search measures (OSM) and covert investigative (search) actions (CISA), access to medical and psychological assistance, and indicators of mental and physical health. It is this specific gap that determines the relevance of the current study.

AIM

The object of the study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the legal guarantees for Ukrainian law enforcement officers performing their official duties in areas of military (combat) operations, and their impact on the preservation of mental and physical health. The research also aims to identify the relationship between the level of implementation of these guarantees, psycho-emotional state, occupational stress, and the risks of burnout among this category of personnel.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted as an interdisciplinary empirical-legal study employing legal, medical-social, and statistical methods. Its objective was to evaluate the relationship between the legal guarantees of the activities of Ukrainian law enforcement officers in areas of military (combat) operations and indicators of their mental and physical health.

The study was cross-sectional in nature. It included: a comparative legal analysis of international standards in the field of mental health under conditions of increased occupational risk; an anonymous survey of Ukrainian law enforcement officers; and statistical processing of the obtained data.

Inclusion criteria were affiliation with a Ukrainian law enforcement agency, age 18 and older, experience in performing official duties in areas of military (combat) operations or in high-risk environments, and voluntary informed consent. Exclusion criteria included refusal to participate, incomplete questionnaires, and the provision of answers that might contain restricted or classified information.

In accordance with the defined criteria, the empirical base of the study comprised the survey results of $n=48$ Ukrainian law enforcement officers who had experience performing official duties in areas of military (combat) operations or other high-risk conditions. The sample

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire of Ukrainian law enforcement officers regarding the assessment of psychological competencies and the perception of legal guarantees under conditions of military (combat) operations (n=48)

Questionnaire block	Indicator value (M±m), points	Comment on the indicator value
The importance of psychological competencies for professional communication	4.3±0.64	high level
Self-assessment of communication skills	3.7±0.72	moderately high level
Prevention of professional stress and burnout	2.8±0.9	average level
Perception of legal guarantees	3.1±0.84	average level
Legal certainty regarding operational and investigative measures (ORZ) and covert investigative (search) actions (CI(S)A)	3.0±0.82	average level
Risks of maladaptive behavior	2.9±0.88	average level
Self-assessment of mental health	3.2±0.78	average level
Self-assessment of physical health	3.6±0.74	moderately high level

Source: compiled by the authors of this study

Table 2. Correlations between legal guarantees and indicators of mental and physical health of Ukrainian law enforcement officers under conditions of military (combat) operations

Pair of variables	r	p
Legal guarantees and occupational stress	−0.46	0.01
Legal certainty and mental health	0.39	0.01
Legal guarantees and physical health	0.33	0.045
Psychological competencies and mental health	0.3	0.05
Psychological competencies and physical health	0.25	0.06
Legal certainty and burnout	−0.52	0.001

Source: compiled by the authors of this study

characteristics indicate significant professional experience among the respondents: their average age was 31.4±1.1 years, and their average length of service was 7.2±0.8 years. Notably, 100% of the surveyed individuals directly performed tasks in areas of military (combat) operations. The specifics of their activities encompassed both communicative and procedural components: 72.9% of the individuals (n=35) were involved in interactions with victims, witnesses, or the civilian population, while 85.4% (n=41) of the respondents had experience performing procedural or operational tasks.

The primary research instrument was an adapted questionnaire for assessing psychological competencies and the perception of legal guarantees, based on a five-point scale: 1-1.8 – very low level, 1.81-2.6 – low level, 2.61-3.4 – medium level, 3.41-4.2 – moderately high level, 4.3-5.0 – high level of indicator values [17]. It included blocks regarding the significance of psychological competencies, self-assessment of communication skills, prevention of occupational stress and burnout, perception of legal guarantees, legal certainty of covert investigative (search) actions (CISA), risks of

maladaptive behavior, as well as socio-professional characteristics. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.87 (an adequate level of consistency), ensuring its validity.

Statistical processing was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics v. 27.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp., USA). Quantitative indicators were presented as the mean value and standard error of the mean (M±m). Spearman's correlation analysis (r) was performed to evaluate the relationships between variables. Differences were considered statistically significant at p < 0.05.

ETHICS

The study was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary; respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, its anonymous nature, and their right to withdraw from participation at any stage. The research protocol was approved by the local bioethics committee.

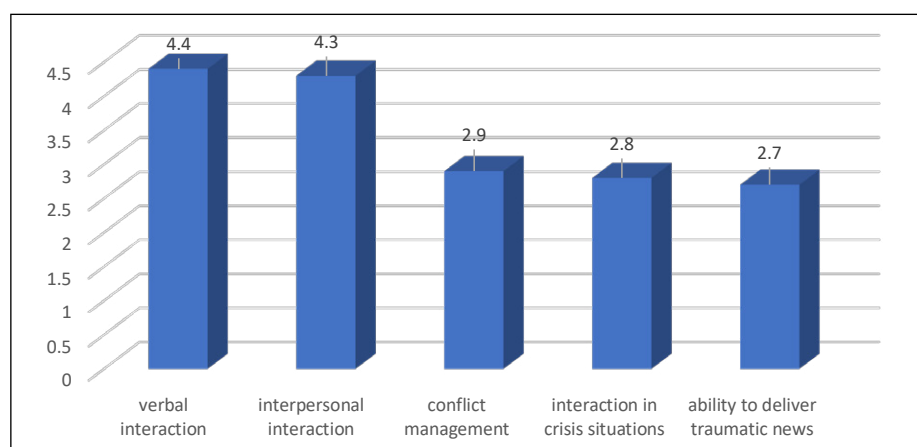


Fig. 1. In-depth self-assessment of existing psychological competencies among respondents (points) (n=48)

Picture taken by the authors

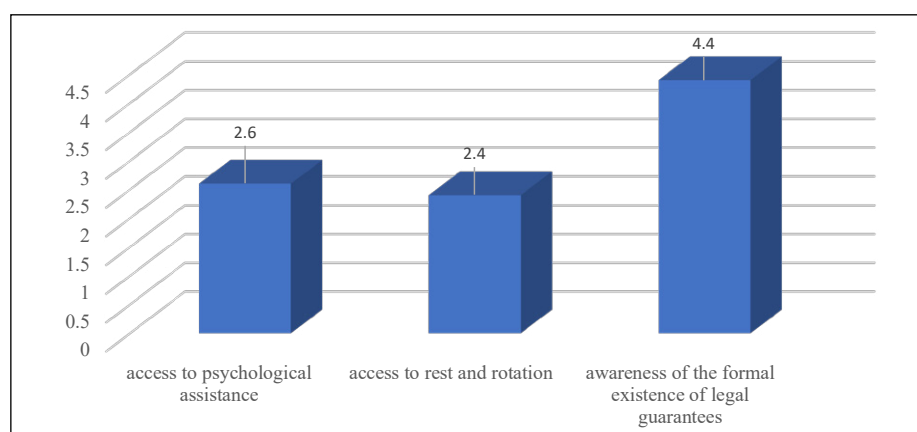


Fig. 2. In-depth self-assessment of the perception of legal guarantees by respondents (points) (n=48)

Source: compiled by the authors of this study

RESULTS

The results of the questionnaire regarding the assessment of psychological competencies and the perception of legal guarantees are presented in Table 1.

The majority of respondents highly evaluated the importance of psychological knowledge for professional communication – 4.3 ± 0.64 points, whereas the self-assessment level of their communication capabilities was rated as moderately high (3.7 ± 0.72 points) (Table 1). Notably, there were no respondents who rated the importance of psychological knowledge for professional communication at a low level (1.0–2.6 points); the proportion of those who rated it at a medium level (2.61–3.4 points) was 8.3% (4 out of 48 individuals), while at a sufficiently high level (4.3–5.0 points) it was 62.5% of the respondents (30 out of 48 individuals).

In turn, a more in-depth self-assessment of existing psychological competencies revealed a predominance of verbal and interpersonal interaction skills, which scored 4.4 ± 0.62 points and 4.3 ± 0.64 points among the respondents, respectively. Conversely, lower indicators, falling within the medium-level range, pertained to conflict management (2.9 ± 0.88 points), interaction in crisis situations (2.8 ± 0.9 points), and the ability to deliver traumatic news (2.7 ± 0.92 points) (Fig. 1).

The average score for the block on the prevention of occupational stress and burnout was 2.8 ± 0.9 points. The

proportion of respondents who rated their own ability to prevent professional burnout at a low level (1–2.6 points) was 29.2% (14 out of 48 individuals), while only 33.3% (16 out of 48 individuals) demonstrated a high level (4.3–5 points).

The average indicator for the perception of legal guarantees was 3.1 ± 0.84 points. The lowest scores pertained to access to psychological assistance – 2.6 ± 0.92 points, and rest and rotation – 2.4 ± 0.94 points, whereas the level of general awareness regarding the formal existence of legal guarantees was high and amounted to 4.4 ± 0.62 points (Fig. 2).

The average indicator of legal certainty regarding operational-search measures (OSM) and covert investigative (search) actions (CISA) was 3.0 ± 0.82 points. At the same time, the proportion of respondents who rated their own legal certainty at a low level (1–2.6 points) was 33.3% (16 out of 48 individuals), while only 16.7% (8 out of 48 individuals) rated it at a high level.

The average score on the scale of risk of maladaptive behaviour was 2.9 ± 0.88 points, indicating that risks are already present among a noticeable portion of the respondents. Consequently, 37.5% (18 out of 48) of the respondents indicated a reluctance to seek psychological help due to stigmatization or fear of negative professional consequences. At the same time, 58.3% (28 out of 48) of the surveyed individuals were aware

of the potential legal consequences of maladaptive behaviour for their official activities.

Physical health was rated higher by the respondents (3.6 ± 0.74 points), indicating that the majority of them feel physically relatively well, with occasional, but non-critical, limitations. Mental health (3.2 ± 0.78 points) was at a lower level – a zone of moderate well-being, where there may be periodic emotional difficulties, stress, or a decrease in psychological comfort.

For a deeper analysis of the factors influencing the psycho-emotional and physical state of the respondents, a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted. The obtained results support the hypothesis that the level of legal certainty and the full implementation of guarantees are key determinants of the occupational health of law enforcement officers under combat conditions.

The generalized indicators of the relationships are presented in Table 2.

Upon further investigation of the correlations between the studied factors, the following was established:

- a negative correlation between the level of legal guarantees and occupational stress ($r = -0.46$, $p = 0.01$), reflecting the role of legal uncertainty as a psycho-emotional stressor;

- a positive correlation between legal certainty and self-assessment of mental health ($r = 0.39$, $p = 0.01$); better awareness of legal guarantees and normative certainty is associated with a higher self-assessment of mental well-being, reflecting reduced anxiety and an increased sense of control;

- a positive correlation between psychological competencies and self-assessment of physical health ($r = 0.33$, $p = 0.045$), which may be mediated through more effective coping strategies, stress regulation, and health behaviors.

Furthermore, an insufficient level of legal guarantees was associated with an increased risk of emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.52$, $p = 0.001$) (Table 2). This is the most pronounced correlation in the model, highlighting the critical nature of the legal factor as a determinant of professional burnout and a factor influencing the respondents' mental health.

DISCUSSION

The obtained results confirm that the guarantees of the rights of Ukrainian law enforcement officers in areas of military (combat) operations should be considered not only as a formal element of their official status but also as a practical mechanism for preserving mental and physical health. The identified relationship between the level of perception of legal guarantees, the availability of medical and psychological assistance, legal certainty, and the level of occupational stress indicates that legal protection in

such conditions performs not only a regulatory but also a preventive function [3, 4].

The study results provide grounds to assert that legal certainty is an independent factor in the mental stability of a Ukrainian law enforcement officer. Insufficient clarity regarding the limits of a lawful order, procedural requirements, and potential legal consequences increases the level of occupational stress, which is consistent with the approach of the European Court of Human Rights, according to which a system of secret measures must be accompanied by clear and foreseeable safeguards against abuse [9].

An important result is the identified gap between awareness of the significance of psychological competencies and actual readiness to act in conflict, crisis, and traumatic communicative situations. This indicates that psychological competence in combat (military) conditions should be considered a component of occupational safety, rather than an optional individual quality [2, 5, 19].

The results regarding occupational stress and burnout are consistent with contemporary studies that indicate a high level of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and operational stress among Ukrainian law enforcement officers, especially under conditions of organizational overload and insufficient support [1, 13, 15, 19]. In this context, the position of the World Health Organization, according to which mental health in the workplace requires systemic organizational measures, training, and support, is fully relevant to the performance of duties by Ukrainian law enforcement officers under conditions of military (combat) operations [16].

Special attention should be paid to the established link between the insufficient implementation of legal guarantees and the risks of maladaptive behaviour. Such risks are not only of an individual-psychological nature but also organizational-legal, as they can affect discipline, security, confidentiality, and the legality of professional actions [4, 20]. This also aligns with the approach of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the psychological support of personnel throughout the entire cycle of task execution [17, 21].

It is worth emphasizing that service in combat conditions is accompanied not only by a high level of stress but also by a significant gap between formally enshrined legal guarantees and their practical implementation. It is precisely this discrepancy that becomes a catalyst for emotional exhaustion and a decrease in professional effectiveness. Comparing the obtained results with modern international approaches (WHO, UNODC, NATO, ECHR) once again proves the necessity of transitioning to a systemic, preventive approach to protecting the mental health of law enforcement officers. Such an approach should integrate the improvement of legislation, clarity of procedures, enhanced psychological training, and barrier-free access to assistance within a unified logic of ensuring professional resilience and the humanisation of service.

At the same time, the results should be evaluated taking into account the limitations of the study. The cross-sectional design does not allow for the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships, and the use of self-assessment may lead to socially desirable responses or the underreporting of specific problems. Despite this, the study has scientific and practical value, as it demonstrates the need to integrate legal, organizational, and psychological mechanisms into a unified system of protection for Ukrainian law enforcement officers under conditions of military (combat) operations.

CONCLUSIONS

The study confirmed that the legal guarantees for law enforcement officers under combat conditions are a critical mechanism for preserving their mental and physical health. The realization of the constitutional

rights to life and health protection requires practical implementation through the creation of safe service conditions, a clear rotation schedule, and unimpeded access to medical and psychological assistance.

It was established that the level of legal certainty during the conduct of operational-search measures (OSM) and covert investigative (search) actions (CISA) directly impacts psycho-emotional stability: clear regulatory frameworks reduce anxiety levels, whereas legal uncertainty acts as an additional occupational stressor.

Correlation analysis demonstrated a direct relationship between the comprehensive implementation of legal guarantees and the indicators of professional burnout and maladaptation. The survey results indicate an acute need to improve crisis interaction and conflict management skills within the professional training of officers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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