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### ABSENCE FROM WORK DUE TO ILLNESS OR INJURY

Evidence from the Community labour force survey

**More than 3 million persons were absent from work because of illness or injury, during the reference week**

There are many reasons for which people can be absent from their work in a normal working week<sup>(1)</sup>. Any absence from work means that a certain number of working hours are lost and therefore it may affect the production of goods and services. Some reasons for absence, like vacation, bank holidays, flexible working hours, training of personnel, etc., can be known in advance and firms may plan their production and operations accordingly. Other absences, however, are not easy to foresee in advance (e.g. bad weather, illness or injury, labour dispute, etc.).

It is estimated that during a typical week in Spring of 1988, of the 128,4 mio persons in employment, 21,6 mio (16,8 %) were absent from work for all or part of the week for a variety of reasons. For the Community as a whole, this meant that some 380 mio hours were not available for the production of goods and services during that week. These lost hours correspond to 7,8 % of the total number of hours usually worked during a week<sup>(2)</sup>.

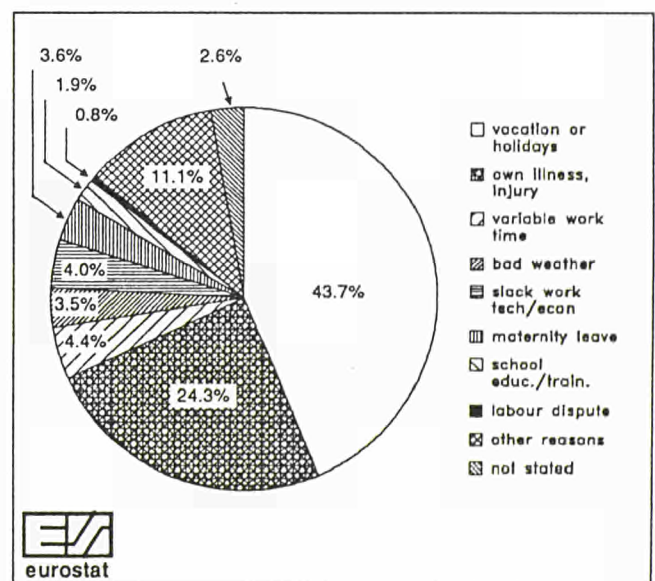
As one may expect, vacation and holidays ranked as the most common reason for absence from work (43,7 % of all absences)<sup>(3)</sup>. The next most significant reason, illness or injury<sup>(4)</sup>, accounted for

24,3% of all hours lost during the survey reference week.

This note focuses on those persons who were absent from work, for all or part of the reference week, because of own illness, injury or temporary disability.

Among the most important characteristics of sick-absence is its duration. In 1988, 71% of such absences covered all of the reference week.

Fig. 1 : Why are people absent from work?





Average time lost (calculated from Table 1 as the ratio of the number of hours lost by the corresponding number of persons) because of illness or injury was 30,5 hours per week, while the average for all other reasons was 15,5 hours.

The labour force survey results also indicate that different member states, economic sectors, types of employment, age groups and sex are differently affected by illness or injury.

### COMPARISON BETWEEN MEMBER STATES

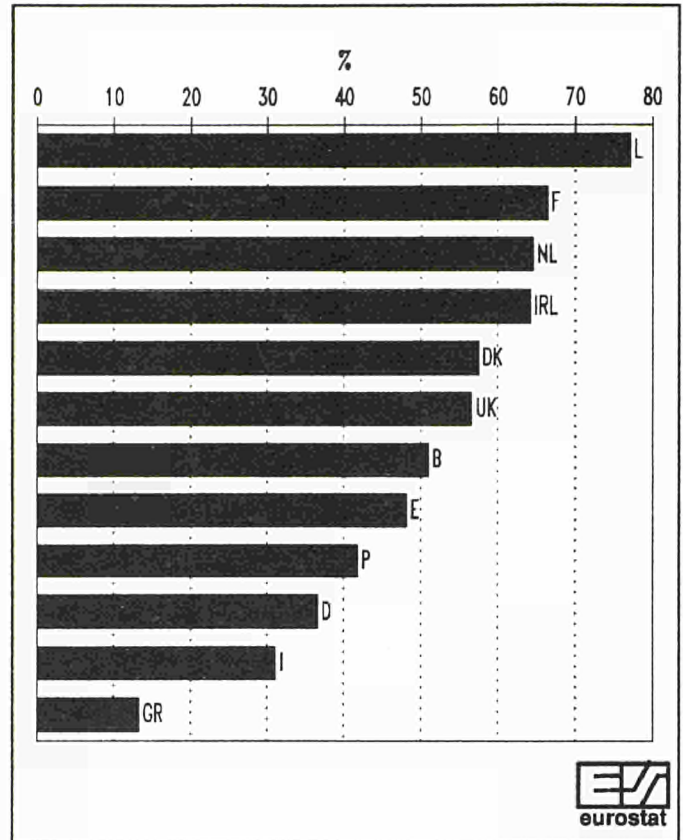
During a typical working week in Spring 1988, own illness or injury was the main reason for which 3.029.000 persons were absent from work for at least part of the week. For most countries illness or injury accounted for a significant proportion of all absences. However, the range between the various member states is quite large: hours lost due to illness explained 40% of all absences in Belgium, 20% in the United Kingdom and only 6% in Greece. These rates are strongly influenced by all other reasons for absence and mainly by vacation and holidays. In Figure 2, therefore, we have excluded from the analysis systematic reasons for absence such as vacation, bank holidays, education, training and flexible working hours. Among all the remaining reasons for absence ( bad weather, illness, slack work for technical or economic reasons, labour dispute, personal and family responsibilities, etc. ), for the period 1983 to 1988, illness or injury explained more than 45% of hours lost for most member states.

For EUR-12, it is estimated that 1,9% of the usual weekly working time was lost to illness or injury. From Table 2 we see that this rate is lowest in Greece (0,5%) and highest in the Netherlands (4%). One reason for the very low rate in Greece is the high share of self-employed, family workers and agricultural sector in total employment. Nevertheless, even when we restrict the analysis to employees the rate for Greece is still low (0,7%).

### TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT AND INDUSTRY

Employees (2.707.000 persons) represent 89% of all absences caused by illness or injury, while accounting for some 81% of employed persons. The above number means that 2,6% of employees

Fig.2 : Share of illness in hours lost (\*)



(\*) Average 1983 to 1988. Excludes holidays, training and variable hours

were absent from their job for at least part of the week because of illness or injury. This rate varies considerably throughout the Community from 0,8% in Greece, 1,8% in Germany to 5,3% in the Netherlands.

By contrast, employers and self-employed persons were less frequently absent from work because of illness or injury. In all there were 322.000 such persons, which correspond to only 1,3% of the total number of non-employees.

There does not appear to be any difference in the incidence of absences due to illness between full-time and part-time workers.

Agriculture, mainly comprised by self-employed and family workers, has the lowest sectoral rate of absence due to illness or injury. Hours lost in agriculture for this reason correspond to 1,3% of hours usually worked per week. The highest absence rate due to illness or injury was found in the building sector where more than 9 mio hours (2,3% of hours usually worked) were lost.

## AGE AND SEX

Workers of 50 years old and over were more frequently absent from work due to illness or injury than workers aged 14-24 or 25-49 years. During the survey reference week 3,2% of workers aged 50 and over were absent for at least part of the week due to illness or injury while the corresponding rate of absence for all other ages was 2.1%.

For the economy as a whole differences between men and women were not very important (1,8% of men's and 2% of women's usual working time was lost because of illness). However, female absence for this reason was clearly higher in the service sector and more particularly in Banking, Public Administration and Other Services, while it was lower in Agriculture.

**Table 1 : Number of persons absent from work and hours of work lost during the reference week by reason of absence, EUR - 1988**

Reason for absence	Number of persons absent from work		Number of hours lost	
	x1000	%	x 1000	%
Vacation or holidays	9355	43.3	166086	43.7
Own illness or injury	3029	14.0	92416	24.3
Variable working time	2817	13.0	16569	4.4
Bad weather	865	4.0	13208	3.5
Slack work for technical or economic reasons	747	3.5	15342	4.0
Maternity leave	407	1.9	13854	3.6
School education or training	303	1.4	7245	1.9
Labour dispute	166	0.8	3205	0.8
All other reasons	3081	14.3	42252	11.1
Not stated	846	3.9	9704	2.6
<b>All reasons</b>	<b>21616</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>379882</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2 : Hours lost due to illness and hours usually worked during the reference week by country 1988**

	EUR	B	DK	D	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	P	UK
Hours lost due to illness (millions)	92.4	1.2	2.0	16.5	0.8	8.5	15.7	0.6	10.0	0.1	7.9	3.5	25.7
Hours usually worked (millions)	4871.1	128.1	96.3	1059.0	156.8	476.8	730.4	42.4	813.2	6.1	197.3	185.9	978.8
%	1.9	0.9	2.1	1.6	0.5	1.8	2.1	1.4	1.2	1.1	4.0	1.9	2.6

**Table 3 : Hours usually worked and hours lost due to illness by industry and sex  
EUR - 1988**

Sector of economic Activity	MEN			WOMEN		
	Hours usually worked x1000	Hours lost due to illness x1000	%	Hours usually worked x1000	Hours lost due to illness x1000	%
Agriculture	285772	4089	1.4	128503	1121	0.9
Other primary industries	220423	5012	2.3	45101	1111	2.5
Manufacturing industries	732116	15442	2.1	285927	6935	2.4
Building	370664	8661	2.3	21083	377	1.8
Distributive trades	568791	7661	1.3	377672	6207	1.6
Transport and communications	247192	5506	2.2	49805	1081	2.2
Banking and insurance	214780	2696	1.3	141421	2570	1.8
Public administration	243896	4596	1.9	124358	3015	2.4
Other services	326757	4883	1.5	480329	11306	2.4
<b>Total (*)</b>	<b>3214884</b>	<b>58650</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1656202</b>	<b>33766</b>	<b>2.0</b>

(\*) includes those who did not declare the industry

#### Footnotes

(1) Reasons for working less hours per week include the following: bad weather, slack work for technical or economic reasons, labour dispute, education or training, variable hours, own illness-injury or temporary disability, maternity leave, special leave for personal or family reasons, annual holidays, bank holidays, start of job/change in job, end of job, other reasons.

More information can be obtained from : Labour Force Survey, Methods and definitions, 1988, Eurostat.

(2) Information about usual working time and hours lost refer to the individuals' main job. Some persons have more than one job on which they normally work a certain number of hours per week and from which they may be

absent for any reason. The Community labour force survey does not contain, at present, hours worked in or hours lost from second jobs.

(3) The survey data reflect the situation in Spring (March, April, May) of 1988. The annual average of certain highly seasonal reasons for absence, like vacation, is expected to be quite higher.

(4) Illness, injury or temporary disability relate directly to the respondent and not to other members of his/her family. For example, if a mother was absent from her work because her child was ill, then the reason for absence is coded as special leave for personal or family reasons.

**For further information**

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