

# Discrimination Against Vulnerable Personnel in the Workplace

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**Abstract.** *The paper aims to address the dimensions of discrimination faced in the labor market, from the perspective of the employment process and workplace discrimination by some categories of vulnerable staff, as defined in the reports of the European Union, and the reports of the Romanian institutes, bodies and NGOs. The literature focuses mainly on vulnerable groups, frames, and situations of discrimination, types of vulnerabilities or methods by which these people are discriminated against, and too little on the coping mechanisms that they use. The research method was a questionnaire survey using a quantitative methodology. It consists of several sections and was administered to a sample of 66 respondents, aged over 18 years. The research questions aim to reveal the discriminations that occur and how these manifest. After the application of the questionnaire, the data was interpreted by the authors and it emerged that the discrimination manifests in various ways from the early stages of the employment process until the conclusion of the individual employment contract. The aim was to quantify and expose harmful practices of the employers that promote practices that are considered unethical, illegal, or discriminatory, in some cases, and that have repercussions on the individual, on the company in which they work, by affecting the working environment, creating internal tensions and creating a toxic organizational culture leading to a negative financial impact.*

**Keywords:** discrimination, vulnerability, vulnerable personnel, harmful employment practices.

## Introduction

Vulnerability is a part of the human condition, even the experienced staff abilities and skills for a particular job can be fragile and limited in the social interactions they have with their work colleagues, family, or friends. Vulnerability reveals that these employees have the least opportunities to participate in the decisions that shape their work environment (Academy of European Law, 2015). The discrimination they face upon entry and during their activity in the labor market has a wide range of symptoms and it often manifests directly or indirectly, subtly or brutally. Regardless, discrimination is related to features connected to the organization of people's lives and their basic needs: the need for recognition, and the need to feel protected and dignified at the individual level.

The traits or conditions by which these individuals can be discriminated against are generally inherent and are related to gender, religion, race, disability, social condition, etc. The sensitive conditions that these individuals or groups have transformed them into vulnerable staff/personnel (Masferrer & García-Sánchez, 2016). Through the questionnaire applied in this research, a systematic approach was attempted, to examine various characteristics and situations

that generate the discrimination of vulnerable personnel. Such contingencies include the demographic, and cultural characteristics or interfering in the employment process on the labor market or during the exercise of their duties.

## Theoretical Background

In Romania, there is a wide series of normative acts aimed at the protection of vulnerable personnel, such as the Constitution of Romania, the Administrative Code, the Labor Code Law 53/2003, the Civil Code, the Criminal Code, etc. Government Ordinance No. 137/2000 is the basic anti-discrimination ordinance in Romania and regulates the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination, specifically protecting equality in employment and profession (Ordinance no. 137/2000).

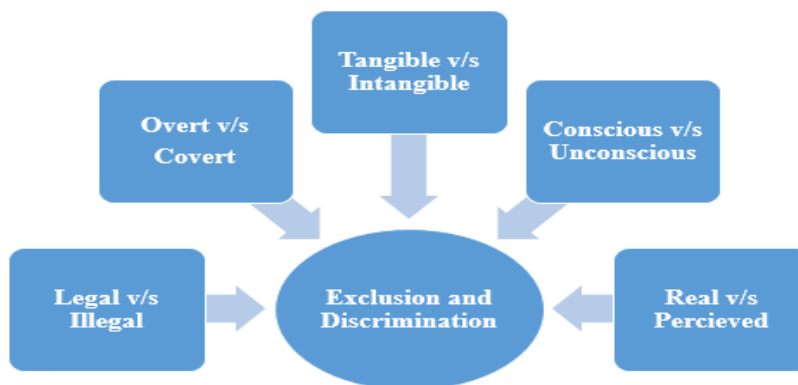
In the European Union (EU), vulnerable staff activating in the labor market has long been recognized as being exposed to greater or more serious risks affecting health and safety at work, both in terms of employment and other types of discrimination at the workplace or in the hiring process (Belin, 2011).

Legal theorists have distinguished between a wide range of discrimination types: direct and indirect, disparate treatment and disparate impact, intentional and institutional, individual and structural (Phillips, 2007). It was concluded that the employer can discriminate based on race, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, disability, age (50 years of age or older), genetic information, and so on. Discrimination refers to conditions that can include unfair treatment, abuse or harassment, refusal of a reasonable job change, inappropriate questions, retaliation, and refusal to participate in certain actions or activities (United States EEOC, 2023).

## Types of discrimination

Discrimination is often so subtle and so difficult to notice, it is configured in a wide variety of ways, although in many cases it can also manifest itself in unconscious forms (Neumark, 2018). This applies even in the cases that have an aggression component to them.

The perception of discrimination varies, with complex elements, and is often made without the will of the discriminator (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Perception of discrimination**

Source: adapted from Das, M.B., 2013.

According to Barry *et al.* (2011), whole communities are also threatened by political, environmental, and academic vulnerability, among others. Considering these, Iorhen P.T. (2021) identified other types of vulnerabilities: physical vulnerability, political vulnerability, social vulnerability, economic vulnerability, environmental vulnerability, academic vulnerability, attitudes vulnerability, etc. Vulnerability treatment indicates that vulnerable employees have the fewest opportunities to participate in the decisions that shape their work environment (Piasna, et al., 2006).

### ***The labor market***

The labor market is formed, on the one hand, by the employer, and on the other hand, by the labor force on the other hand. The latter consists of individuals who are employed and individuals who are not employed. Apart from these two working categories, there is a third category represented by those individuals in society who are not employed and who, for various reasons, do not want or are unable to work, which includes pupils, students, retired persons, etc.

As Altman (2020) described it, the labor market can be defined as “a generalized concept that denotes the interaction between supply (the number of people available for work), demand (the number of jobs available), and the wage rate”. All these variables lead implicitly to the creation of diverse categories of personnel which can be subjected to discrimination:

- *young employees* – “are exposed to the risk of being exploited by their colleagues” (Keil et al., 2019);
- *older employees* – during employment interviews, are rated lower for any capacity for which they were interviewed (Neumark, 2018);
- *female employees* – still represent a category of vulnerable personnel in Romania and worldwide. One of the examples of discrimination is segregation, especially in small industrial towns such as Turceni, Sulina, Rovinari, Aninoasa, etc. (Istratea & Bănică, 2015);
- *Roma employees* – in Romania, the Roma group is presented as being “both different and unequal, thus accentuating its stigmatization” (Krings. et al., 2011);
- *people at poverty risk* – self-employed persons, people who are in a marginal position on the labor market, i.e., those who, for various reasons, enter and leave the labor market (Halleröd, et al., 2015);
- *adults with disabilities* – it is the most important characteristic that can induce a certain type of vulnerability, whether it is discrimination based on physical or social considerations. A handicap can also “induce poverty because of the stigmas associated with it or simply because of the limitations of opportunities in terms of jobs” (Baciu, et al., 2017, pp. 5-19).

In a 2019 report by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Romania regarding “*The analysis and evaluation of vulnerable groups to establish the need for social services*”, it was concluded that the most vulnerable groups at the national level are *the people at risk of poverty and the elderly*. It is reported that, at the national level “1 out of 4 people are at relative or near poverty risk, and 4 out of 10 people are at risk of social exclusion”

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Formulation of the research problem***

The problem of the present research emerges from the practices approached by some employers in the labor market in Romania. The questions applied in this research try to reach the premises

underlying the discriminations that have been revealed in the scientific literature. This research highlights aspects related to the way or the environment in which these discriminatory practices emerge.

The research problem of the study can be defined as: "Establishing the ways in which the personnel considered vulnerable is disadvantaged, during the entry process or while it exercises its duties in relation to the services provided on the labor market". The research problem generates a series of research questions:

- 1) What are the discriminatory situations to which the vulnerable personnel are subjected?
- 2) When do the discrimination situations occur and how do they manifest?

The study deployed a *quantitative methodology*, predominantly *exploratory* and *descriptive*. The main research method used was *the questionnaire survey*. The research involved a sample of 66 people and was conducted over a period of circa 5 calendar months, from November 2022 to March 2023, respectively. One questionnaire was invalidated because it did not meet the established criteria, thus the authors proceeded to analyze the remaining 65 valid questionnaires.

### ***The research method***

The research method was the questionnaire survey, using quantitative methodology. The research instrument (the developed questionnaire) included 63 questions and consisted of several sections. It was distributed electronically via Google Forms to a sample of 65 respondents aged over 18 years old. The questionnaire was divided into 10 sections, referring to: A - The demographic background of the respondents, B - Respondents' occupation, C - Recruitment, D - Training and promotion, E - Dismissal, F - Wages, G - Equality of treatment, H - Workplace aggression, I - Coping methods, J - Vulnerable categories.

In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results, the authors used closed-ended questions (having predetermined answers), with either a single question option or a five-point Likert scale, from "0 - Not at all" to "5 - Very much". Other closed-ended questions used other five-point Likert scale options, such as "0 - Unfriendly" to "5 - Very good". For some questions, the mixed answer system was used, giving the respondents the option to freely answer the questions through the "Other" answer option.

### ***Description of the analyzed sample***

The sample included 65 people questioned. The questionnaire reached the following categories: young employees, elderly employees, female employees, Roma employees, adults with disabilities, people at risk of poverty, etc. in a total number of 12 primary groups. The non-probabilistic, convenience, and "snowball" methods were used for sampling.

It was considered that data validation was not necessary as the article used descriptive statistics, for which data validation is not a precondition.

Given the special characteristics of the sample members concerned, it was not possible to carry out a scientific sampling, but an empirical one. The sampling used in the study employed common sampling methods such as convenience and snowball sampling (Hair, et al., 2011).

The sample is relevant to the study because as a structure, it included many categories of vulnerable targeted staff: people with disabilities, people at risk of poverty, women, pregnant women, unemployed, job seekers, etc.

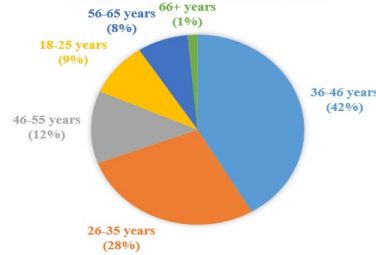
The sample structure was as follows:

**GENDER OF RESPONDENTS**



**Figure 2. Gender of respondents;**

**AGE OF RESPONDENTS**



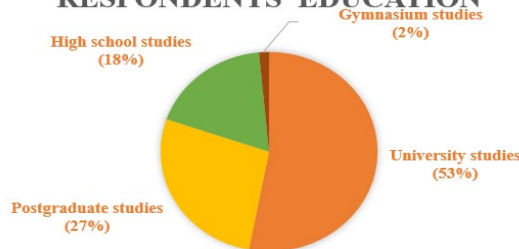
**Figure 3. Age of respondents**

Source: own research results.

As can be observed in Figure 2, the sample encompassed more women (66.2%) than men (33.8%). The age of the questioned people varied. The majority of respondents (41.5 %), were aged between 36-45 years, 27.7% were 26-35 years old, 12.3% were 46-55 years old, 9.2% were aged 18-25 years old, 7.7% were 56-65 years and only 1.5% were over 66 years old, as depicted in Figure 3.

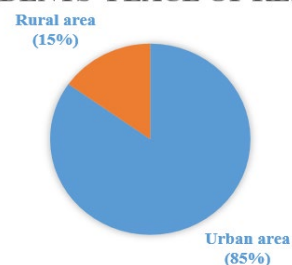
As Figure 4 shows, most of the respondents (53%) have completed some form of university education, 27.3% have postgraduate studies, 18.2% have high school education, and 1.5% graduated secondary school. The vast majority of respondents 84.8 % live in urban areas, while 15.2% live in rural areas, as Figure 5 shows:

**RESPONDENTS' EDUCATION**



**Figure 4. Respondents' education;**

**RESPONDENTS' PLACE OF RESIDENCE**



**Figure 5. Respondents' residence**

Source: own research results.

Regarding their position, 76.2% of the surveyed employees hold executive positions, and 23.8% hold management positions. More than half of the surveyed respondents worked for private employers, while 42.9% worked for public employers. The work fields are very varied, the main fields mentioned being the financial and insurance areas (16.7%), and education (13.3%).

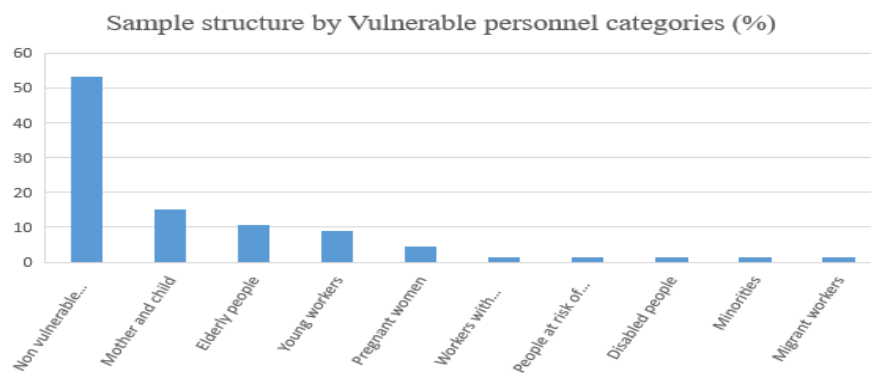
Another important aspect of the analyzed sample is that the schooling level of women is higher. Among the 43 female persons involved in this study, 37 (86%) have university or postgraduate studies, while only 16 (73%) of the 22 male respondents have similar studies.

In conclusion, it can be noted that the sample is predominantly represented by women (66.2%), aged 18 to 66+ years old, the predominant age of the sample being respondents aged 35-46 years, representing (42%), the majority (53%) having a university degree, and living in an urban environment. The majority of respondents are employed with an individual employment contract and generally work for a single employer. A percent of 75.7% signed an individual employment

contract for an indefinite period, and only 24.2% had a determined period contract. Such contract duration varies from a few months to a few years.

Another important aspect that emerged from the questioning of vulnerable personnel was that although an attempt was made to include as many respondents as possible in the sample, of the vulnerable personnel, the respondents did not declare themselves as part of a vulnerable group as defined by the Romanian Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

Therefore, 52.3 % of the respondents declared that they were not part of any vulnerable group, 10.8 % declared that they were part of the group of elderly people over 50 years old, a percentage of 15.4 % declared that they were part of the mother and child group, some identified themselves as people at risk of poverty 1.5%, others as people with disabilities 1.5%, pregnant women 4.6%, young employees 7.7%, ethnic minority people 1.5%, migrant workers 1.5%, as depicted in Figure 6:



**Figure 6. Sample structure by Vulnerable personnel categories (%)**

Source: own research results.

It can be observed that even if some of the respondents were part of these vulnerable categories, they did not want to declare it, and resorted to solving these problems by themselves.

## Results and discussions

To pertinently analyze the situations that the personnel considered vulnerable have experienced in the Romanian labor market, the authors chose to explore this phenomenon from two perspectives: the manifestation of these types of abuses during the hiring process, and the discrimination at the workplace.

Among the respondents of the analyzed sample, the vast majority (79.7%) actively participated in the recruitment process. From the results of the analysis of the applied questionnaire, it emerged that these discriminations are varied and can be manifested in a multitude of ways, from the early stages of the hiring process. The equality of opportunities is often overlooked, and it was concluded that 52.4% of the respondents had noticed limiting conditions in the employment announcements. These limitations referred to focusing the announcement on certain social categories or age ranges, even for positions for which these limitations they considered unnecessary. Of these, 19% of the respondents stated that they had seen job advertisements directed to men or women only.

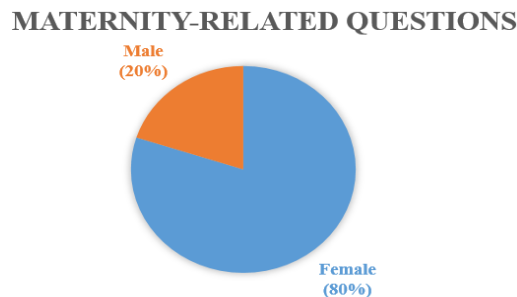
### ***Discrimination in the recruitment process***

Compared the results of other studies, the recruitment process is complex, these forms of discrimination include: how job advertisements are made, where they are posted, how interviews are conducted, how they are perceived during the probationary period of employees, and by which employers (Neumark, 2018).

In the specialized literature, a large number of types of discrimination have been reported by other studies, with are congruent with the results of this study. These include, without being limited to: *discrimination by law against people with disabilities* (Baciu, et al., 2017), *occupational segregation of women* - is based on the physiological and psychological characteristics of each gender. This is prevalent in the rural environment in Romania (Istrate & Banica, 2015), *benevolent/positive discrimination* (Skadegård, 2017), *abuse* (bullying or harassment) (Wilkins, 2014).

Furthermore, the respondents stated that during the recruitment process, they received questions about their marital status, their children, or their plans to have children in the future. These questions were addressed predominantly to women.

In general, women are associated with the concept of motherhood. Therefore, the data clearly shows an inclination of employers to avoid situations in which female employees could go on maternity leave. Employers often think about the disruptive effects that can be created in the work process-and work teams. The respondents gave answers indicating that in case of maternity leaves, they were replaced, the years spent on parental leave affected their professional career, and reported cases in which their job was terminated, or they were dismissed upon returning to work, as depicted in Figure 7:



**Figure 7. Maternity-related questions**

Source: own research results.

Moreover, during the recruitment process, 25.9% of the respondents declared that they were rejected for lack of experience, which was often associated with age. Many times, even so early as from the recruitment stages, young people are omitted and there is a certain reluctance to involve them in the recruitment process altogether.

At the end of the hiring process, the majority of respondents (58.3%) who were rejected from the hiring interview, stated that they did not receive feedback from the employer regarding the reason why they were removed from the process. In general, these employer practices discouraged employees from participating in future recruitment processes. At a psychological level, the repercussions of these events translate into higher anxiety for the people subjected to them.

### ***Discrimination at the workplace***

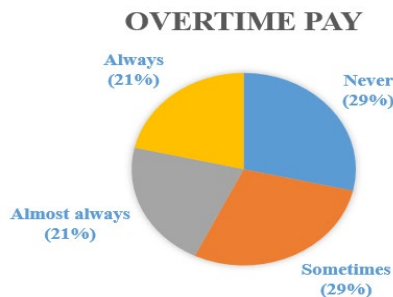
This study showed that discrimination also manifests in the workplace, long after the recruitment process is over, or it emerges with the change of certain environmental or social factors, such as political or social changes.

Although most of the members of the analyzed sample mainly reside in an urban environment, work in the town of residence, and benefit from university or postgraduate education, the vast majority of them (66.7%), declared that they earn a net salary of less than 5000 lei (approx. 1000 euro). A worrying aspect is the fact that, although the schooling rate of females is higher, the data show that only 30% of women earn a net monthly salary of over 5000 lei, compared to males, who declared that more than 39% of them earned the same net salary of over 5000 lei. So, even if the fields in which employees of the two genders work are the same or similar, even if the women have a higher level of education compared to men, men obtain higher salaries than women.

Regarding their benefits, 54.7% of the respondents declared that they did not receive additional benefits offered by the employer, while 45.3% of the respondents declared that they had. The benefits paid by the employer included mobile phone services, fuel, additional holiday days, transport to and from work, private health insurance, vocational training courses, etc.

### ***Discrimination regarding working hours and payment for overtime***

Another important finding of the study is that the vast majority of respondents (64.6%) stated that they were asked by their employers to work overtime. Of these, a proportion of 28.6% declared that they were never paid for overtime and 28.6% were paid sometimes, while 21.4% said they were paid most of the time, and 21.4% were always paid, as depicted in Figure 8:



**Figure 8. Overtime paid by the employer**

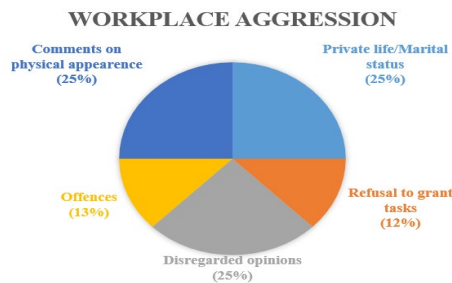
Source: own research results.

### ***Discrimination regarding labor relations***

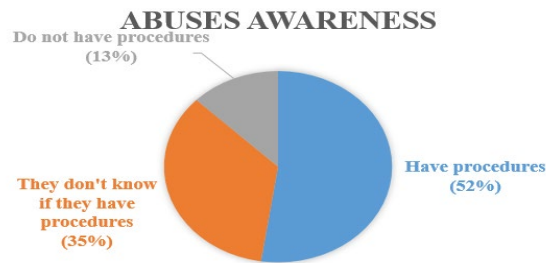
A percent of (72.7%) of the respondents who were fired did not receive any previous indications about it. Of those fired, 11.1% believed they were fired because of their gender, and another 11.1% claimed that they were fired because they were women and they became pregnant.

### ***Discrimination regarding workplace aggression***

Of the tested sample, only (13.8%) of the respondents claimed to have experienced cases of aggression. The declared aggressions consisted of: comments about private life or marital status 20%, the employer refusing to assign tasks because of the employee's gender 10%, their suggestions or opinions being disregarded because of their gender 20%, insults were addressed to make the employee feel incompetent 10%, comments were made about physical appearance 20% (Figure 9):



**Figure 9. Types of aggression that respondents experienced at the workplace**



**Figure 10. Companies' awareness of employees' abuses**

Source: own research results.

As resulted from this analysis, the worrying aspect that emerges from the study regarding the legal and moral responsibility of companies about the involvement in the process of combating abuse in the workplace is that abuse is often neglected. The data shows that either the companies do not inform their employees about abuse prevention, or they do not take any measures in this regard. So, a cumulative percentage of 47.6% of the respondents either are not informed about such procedures or do not have procedures, in this regard, at the workplace, as shown in Figure 10.

## Conclusions

This paper aimed to shed some light on the staff considered vulnerable in the labor market. Following the application of the questionnaire, the authors analyzed a wide variety of information, starting from the vulnerable staff condition, reviewing the legislation that protects this staff, the conditions like social, economic, or other, conditions that make this staff vulnerable, the situations that these categories find themselves in the market workforce and the methods by which they attempt to and cope with them.

This study revealed that the discriminatory practices that affect certain categories of employees are widespread in Romanian companies because these companies try to circumvent existing legislation and do not take consistent measures to protect or improve the conditions affecting these vulnerable categories. According to the applicable legislation, the companies in Romania are obliged to take measures regarding the protection of these categories of employees, by adopting some protective measures or procedures, by which they have to bring to the knowledge of the employees what are the situations that lead to discrimination, to state sanctions or practices, and to eliminate the discriminations inside the company.

Therefore, the study revealed that almost half of the employees are not protected by internal company procedures, or do not even know that they should be protected by them. These companies either do not adopt such procedures, or adopt them formally, without bringing them to the knowledge of the employees. The legislation is often ignored by the management of the companies, institutions, or authorities that are supposed to enforce the laws, or, as in many cases these laws are not effective.

Another significant finding is that women and men earn differently for the same type of work, even if they are equally qualified. Also, during the recruitment process, women are questioned about a potential pregnancy, and these behaviors can seriously affect their psyche and their career.

The employees surveyed had unpleasant experiences in the recruitment process or during work-related activities. These consisted of practices that employers adopt when it comes to recruiting, or are rooted in internal staffing or workplace organization practices.

The repercussions of these practices which are considered unethical, discriminatory, or even illegal, reflect on the individual employees and on the company in which they work, by affecting the work environment, creating internal tensions and a toxic organizational climate that then has a negative impact on the company's organization and finance.

Last but not least, these unhealthy practices have implications for society. If the vulnerable personnel is not integrated, this can affect the company's funds. The actions that these vulnerable categories of employees are subjected to, lead to stressful situations and a stressful lifestyle. Therefore, stress affects the employee psychologically and physically, leading him to resort to behaviors that can be considered harmful. These behaviors reflect on the environment of the company, on the other colleagues, and much more importantly, it is also reflected on the family environment.

Work-related stress affects the whole society in which the affected employee lives. The stress and its implications can affect the individual on a physical level, which often materializes through physical ailments, such as diseases associated with the consumption of harmful substances. and implicitly, can also affect the public health system. Further research needs to be done, to better understand, explain, and establish the range of the coping mechanisms associated with these stressful situations.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing an assesment of the vulnerable personal situation in the Romanian labour market, identifying the types of discrimination faced by these categories. It is one of the few studies carried out on this topic in Romania, providing important information for the vulnerable staff involved, for the companies employing these categories, for the authorities managing these situations and for society as a whole.

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