

Europe Operations

Fatigue among seafarers on the rise



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Work-related fatigue among cargo ship crews is growing worse, despite international regulations and onboard monitoring aimed at ensuring sufficient rest for seafarers, according to a new study from Cardiff University's Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC).

The research, which draws on anonymous survey responses and interviews with over 2,400 maritime workers—including 1,240 from the cargo sector and 1,202 from the cruise industry—highlights persistent challenges with crew fatigue, access to medical care, and overall wellbeing at sea.

The reports come days after a cargo ship, the *NCL Salten*, ran aground near a residential home in Trondheim, Norway. The ship had called at three ports in 24 hours, and the watch officer told authorities he had fallen asleep on the bridge. Investigations are underway to determine if rest hour rules were breached.

The Cardiff study reveals that over a third of cargo seafarers surveyed reported not having had enough sleep in the 48 hours prior to completing the questionnaire. The main causes included long working hours, demanding port duties, irregular shift patterns, vessel movement, and onboard noise—all of which have increased since similar studies were conducted in 2011 and 2016.

Senior officers, in particular, reported higher levels of work-related anxiety contributing to poor sleep. The study also noted a rise in seafarers citing general anxiety and homesickness as barriers to adequate rest.

"Despite better monitoring of staff work/rest hours, fatigue remains an intractable problem for seafarers," said Professor Helen Sampson, director of SIRC. "Evidence shows that even when the Maritime Labour Convention is followed, seafarers may still not be getting the rest they need."

Sampson also pointed to frequent falsification of work/rest hour records in order to conceal overwork, a problem compounded by the precarious employment status of many crew members.

The report also exposes serious gaps in medical support on cargo ships. Nearly 20% of cargo seafarers who had experienced a serious illness or injury at sea reported not receiving timely medical attention. Most vessels lacked a qualified medical professional onboard, with only limited telemedical support available until reaching port.

"Access to medical care on board cargo ships is woefully inadequate," Sampson said. "Having a trained medic onboard would ensure workers are not left suffering for long periods if they are injured or ill when far from land."

The reports call for an overhaul of work/rest regulations, recommending that rest periods be uninterrupted and aligned with adult sleep needs. It also advocates for onboard medical professionals on all vessels, not just cruise ships, private and comfortable sleeping arrangements for all crew, enhanced shore leave opportunities, better food and recreational facilities and access to therapeutic amenities like baths and saunas.

#Seafarers

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