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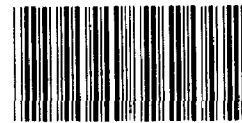
REPORT BY THE U.S.

General Accounting Office

Letter Carriers' Workload And Overtime Concerns At Irvington Station, Fremont, California

The increased volume of mail to be delivered by letter carriers at the Postal Service's Irvington Station made it necessary for carriers to work frequent overtime and on their scheduled days off, causing morale problems. First-line supervisors did not perform required analyses of routes, nor did managers act to eliminate the constant high use of overtime.

GAO makes recommendations to alleviate carrier overtime. The Postal Service concurred with, and promised to take corrective action on, GAO's recommendations.



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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

GENERAL GOVERNMENT
DIVISION

B-217423

The Honorable Robert Garcia
Chairman, Subcommittee on Census
and Population
Committee on Post Office and
Civil Service
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In response to your December 19, 1983, request, we reviewed letter carrier operations at Irvington Station, a subunit of the Fremont, California, Post Office. Irvington Station serves an area of rapidly increasing mail volume. We focused on carrier workload and the use of overtime to complete mail deliveries during fiscal year 1983 and the first part of fiscal year 1984. Our review showed that the volume of mail for Irvington carrier routes caused carriers to be unable to deliver all mail during an 8-hour period. Thus, it was necessary for carriers to regularly work overtime to keep up with the volume of mail. The letter carriers complained to you that they were forced to work overtime and had to frequently cancel leave and scheduled days off.

Our review substantiated carriers' complaints that the workload was causing them to work large amounts of overtime. Although Postal Service guidance states that routes should normally be deliverable in an 8-hour workday, by mid-February of 1984 the average Fremont route required 10 hours daily to complete. During fiscal year 1983, Irvington carriers worked an average of 14 hours of overtime per 2-week pay period, while individual carriers averaged up to 28 hours of overtime. Overtime rose from 11.3 percent of total hours in the spring of 1983 to 23.5 percent by the spring of 1984.

First-line supervisors did not perform required analyses of routes, nor did managers act to eliminate the constant high use of overtime. Although the Fremont Postmaster submitted numerous requests for additional staff to the Oakland Management Sectional Center (MSC), only some of the increases were approved by the MSC. Based on the amounts of overtime being worked, increases in mail volume, and the number of routes in need of

inspection and possible adjustment, we believe that a systematic analysis of route lengths at Irvington would have clearly demonstrated the need for more carriers.

From an economic standpoint, using carrier overtime is not much more costly than hiring additional carriers to deliver excess mail volume because fringe benefits are not paid on overtime. We estimate that Irvington's 22,691 hours of carrier overtime in fiscal year 1983 increased labor costs by \$43,365, some of which was inevitable because of workload fluctuations and such unpredictable events as carrier illness.

A more significant cost of overtime was the damage to carriers' morale. Carriers demonstrated their dissatisfaction by declining to volunteer for overtime; requesting leave on their scheduled days off so they could not be obliged to work; obtaining medical excuses from overtime; filing 128 grievances between October 1983 and February 1984; and, finally, seeking aid from the Subcommittee.

Local postal officials said the high rates of overtime developed because they had not anticipated the continued rapid growth in mail volume at Irvington and had difficulty catching up with it. They expect the recently instituted "router process," which provides mail sorting assistance to carriers, to alleviate the need for large amounts of overtime. At the time of our field work, February 16 to June 8, 1984, the amount of assistance to be provided to each carrier had not been determined.

To aid in correcting the situation at Irvington Station and to help insure that similar problems at the station do not recur, we are recommending that the Postmaster General direct the Regional Postmaster General, Western Region, to

--comply with Postal Service criteria for route evaluation at Irvington Station and establish work assignments that are as close to 8 hours as possible for each regular letter carrier and

--monitor routes in accordance with postal criteria so that carriers maintain 8-hour work assignments to the extent practicable.

In commenting on our draft report, the Postal Service concurred with, and promised to take corrective action on, our recommendations.


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Appendix I contains details of our scope and methodology and our findings regarding workload and overtime. Table 1 on page 6 shows the years that Irvington routes were last evaluated and the results. Appendix II breaks down grievances by category, status, and disposition. Postal Service comments on our draft report appear in appendix IV.

As agreed with your office, we did not pursue the issues of how often and by what criteria routes should be evaluated.

As arranged with your office, we are sending copies of this report to the Postmaster General, and the President, National Association of Letter Carriers. We are also sending copies to the current Chairman, Subcommittee on Operations and Services, and other interested parties.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "W. J. Anderson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "W".

William J. Anderson
Director



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MSC	Management Sectional Center	



LETTER CARRIERS' WORKLOAD AND OVERTIME
CONCERNS AT IRVINGTON STATION,
FREMONT, CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION

During November and December of 1983, letter carriers at Irvington Station in California wrote to the Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, expressing their frustration with difficult working conditions. These letters expressed concern over lengthy (time duration) routes, mandatory overtime and work on their scheduled days off, disapproval of requested leave, and poor management of carrier operations at Irvington Station.

Typical of these letters are the following excerpts

--". . . I have worked constantly 50 to 60 hours per week."

--"All regular routes here routinely take well over 8 hours to complete We are forced to work so much that our time is no longer our own."

The letters prompted the Subcommittee Chairman to request our review of letter carrier operations at Irvington Station. We were asked to determine if carriers' routes were too long, how much overtime was being worked, how much was this overtime costing Irvington Station, how the rate of overtime was affecting carriers as illustrated by the volume and type of grievances and leave requests, whether it was economically more feasible to pay for overtime or employ additional full-time carriers, when carrier routes at Irvington were last evaluated and what changes were made, and how often and by what criteria should routes be evaluated.

Irvington Station is a subunit of the Fremont Post Office located near Oakland in Alameda County, California. Irvington Station provides window services (sale of stamps, receipt of mail, etc.) and delivery services. During fiscal year 1983, Irvington Station delivery services had 61 full-time letter carriers who delivered a daily average of 142,000 pieces of mail on 50 routes in 2 postal zones.

Each day, a letter carrier must "case" the mail for his or her route (i.e., sort it in order of delivery) and deliver it. When necessary, another carrier may be assigned to help complete these duties--a practice known as auxiliary assistance.

A delivery services supervisor oversees the carriers in each zone and reports to the Irvington Station Manager. The

Station Manager reports to the Fremont Postmaster, who in turn reports to the Manager of the Oakland Management Sectional Center (MSC). A Manager of Customer Services at Fremont also has responsibility for carrier operations at Irvington. The chain of command continues through a district and a regional manager to the Postmaster General.

According to Postal Service management and the union branch president, Irvington Station serves an area of rapid growth in mail volume. This growth stems both from new residential and business construction and the increasing use of third-class mailing techniques such as "marriage mailing"¹ and unsolicited second-class newspaper supplements. During fiscal year 1983, mail delivered by Irvington carriers increased 22 percent.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

We conducted our fieldwork from February 16, through June 8, 1984. Our work concentrated on Irvington Station operations during fiscal year 1983 but also included the first part of fiscal year 1984.

We reviewed applicable postal criteria contained in manuals and handbooks, the current national labor agreement between the Postal Service and the National Association of Letter Carriers, a memorandum of understanding between local management and the union, and directives and guidelines issued by higher postal organizational levels. To aid our understanding of letter carrier operations, we attended an orientation class for newly hired letter carriers, observed two experienced letter carriers while they sorted and delivered mail, and attended a grievance arbitration hearing involving an Irvington Station carrier who had been denied sick leave for lack of acceptable medical evidence.

In evaluating the process used at Irvington Station to keep carrier routes at an appropriate length, we reviewed the files for all Irvington Station routes, analyzed mail volume and delivery time for each route during three separate periods, and reviewed route evaluation and adjustment information for each route. To determine the amount and cost of overtime worked by Irvington Station carriers during fiscal year 1983, we reviewed

¹Marriage mailing is a technique in which advertising flyers are combined into one bundle by an independent advertising company and are delivered by letter carriers.

and analyzed each carrier's work hours as shown on the payroll register for the Fremont Post Office.

To ascertain the effects of overtime on Irvington Station letter carriers, we reviewed available records of those carriers who volunteered for overtime; all carrier grievance files and leave requests dated from October 1, 1982, through February 29, 1984; medical certifications for four carriers limiting the overtime they could be required to work; Fremont Post Office records for Irvington Station carriers who resigned, retired, or transferred between October 1, 1982, and February 17, 1984; and the carriers' letters to the Subcommittee Chairman.

To gain a balanced perspective of the situation at Irvington Station, we interviewed postal union and management officials and letter carriers. Specifically, we met with the President of the National Association of Letter Carriers, Branch 4607, which represents carriers at Fremont and three other "associate offices" in the area; the Irvington Station and Fremont Main Post Office shop stewards; the Fremont Postmaster and Customer Services Manager; the Irvington Station Manager and the four delivery supervisors who served at Irvington Station between October 1, 1982, and February 16, 1984; and 12 of the 68 letter carriers who worked at Irvington Station during fiscal year 1983. Eleven of the 12 carriers we spoke with were selected at random using a computer-generated table of random numbers. The 12th carrier was selected because we wanted to talk with all four carriers who had medical certification limiting the overtime they could be required to work.

We performed our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We discussed the results of our work with officials at the Fremont Post Office and Branch 4607 of the National Association of Letter Carriers, the Oakland Management Sectional Center, the Golden Gate District, the Western Region, and Postal Service headquarters.

PROCEDURES FOR DETERMINING ROUTE LENGTH

Postal Service criteria define an efficient letter carrier route as one that can be delivered in as close to 8 work hours as possible (referred to as route length). The Service has established policies and procedures for continually monitoring routes to determine when route evaluations are needed, evaluating routes to ascertain if adjustments are warranted, then adjusting routes so they remain as efficient as possible.

The Service has established two methods for ensuring efficient routes: the minor adjustment procedure and the formal

mail count and route inspection. The primary differences between the two methods are

- frequency of evaluation,
- length of carrier observation time, and
- management sectional center involvement.

Delivery supervisors gather information on carrier routes daily to determine if they are regularly completed in 8 hours. By reviewing daily work hours, mail volume, the number of possible deliveries, and leaving and returning times, the supervisor can identify, evaluate, and adjust routes that consistently use more or less than 8 hours. Local postal policy requires delivery supervisors to file a "Route Analysis and Minor Adjustment" form quarterly to assess whether each route is regularly completed in 8 hours. According to the Oakland MSC's Manager of Delivery and Collections and Fremont postal officials, the minor adjustment procedure should reduce the need for route inspections.

For minor adjustments the Postal Service does not require carrier observation; however, Fremont postal managers observe carriers for 1 day on residential routes or 3 days on business routes. Under the minor adjustment procedure, the MSC must simply review and approve route adjustments made by Fremont postal managers.

Nevertheless, the National Agreement and Postal Service guidelines state that circumstances may still necessitate a formal mail count and inspection of individual routes or an entire postal unit. Service policy states that changes in volume, possible deliveries, personnel, or work procedures may warrant an inspection of the entire unit. Furthermore, Service guidelines state that local postal officials should request a unit-wide inspection when circumstances affect the majority of routes and preclude a realignment under minor adjustment procedures.

The formal mail count and route inspection is performed only when conditions warrant. Route inspections normally require 6 days of mail counts and 1 full day of carrier observation in the office and on the street. They require direct participation of sectional center officials in evaluations and adjustments.

Oakland MSC officials maintain that the additional time and personnel required for route inspections make them more expensive than minor adjustments. Therefore, they have designated

the minor adjustment procedure as the primary method for evaluating routes, to be supplemented by the formal mail count and route inspection only when necessary.

In addition to the above two inspection methods, local postal officials may initiate a special inspection under any of the following conditions:

- when overtime or auxiliary assistance is used consistently,
- when overtime becomes excessive,
- when new construction or demolition takes place, or
- when a once consistent letter carrier begins leaving or returning late.

Besides inspecting routes at their discretion, postal managers must perform a special inspection at a carrier's request if, during any 6-week period, (1) a route requires over 30 minutes of overtime or auxiliary assistance on 3 or more days of each week and (2) the carrier's performance is satisfactory.

The last formal unit-wide mail count and route inspection at Irvington Station was conducted in May 1980. Sixteen of the routes have not been evaluated since 1980; 31 have using the minor adjustment procedure. Because the Fremont Post Office retains only each route's most recent evaluation, only the most recent results, as shown in table 1 on the following page, were available.

Table 1
Results of Most Recent Evaluations^a

<u>Results of evaluation</u>	<u>Date of last evaluation</u>		
	<u>1980</u>	<u>1981-82</u>	<u>1983</u>
Route lengthened	7	2	1
Route shortened	2	1	17
Route not adjusted	7	-	6
Auxiliary routes converted to regular	-	-	4
Total routes last evaluated during the period	<u>16</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>28</u>

^aIncludes information on 47 routes. As of March 1984, Irvington Station had 49 regular routes and 1 auxiliary route; however, information from 2 route files were not available and the auxiliary route is not included in this table. An auxiliary route is one which has an established completion time of less than 8 work hours.

IRVINGTON CARRIER ROUTES
EXCEED POSTAL SERVICE CRITERIA

Most of the routes served by Irvington Station carriers exceed 8 hours. The excessive length of routes is evident in the following data:

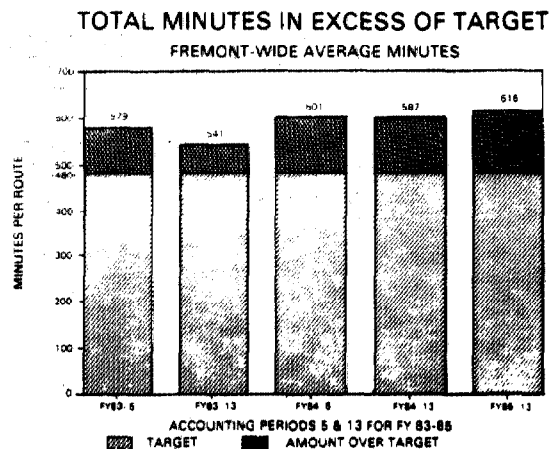
- By mid-February 1984, Fremont Post Office routes, on the average, required 10 hours to complete.
- Based on postal criteria, letter carriers can request a special inspection when routes may be too long. Forty-one of 49 regular routes at Irvington Station qualified for special inspection during a 6-week period from January to March 1984.
- The volume of mail delivered daily by Irvington carriers exceeded the amount postal management expected to be delivered in 8 hours by 25 to 57 percent during fiscal year 1983.
- The 4 supervisors who served at Irvington Station since October 1, 1982, agree with the opinions of 9 of the 11 carriers, selected at random, with whom we spoke and the

opinions of carriers who wrote to the Subcommittee that Irvington routes are too long.

Time to complete routes is high and increasing

As shown in figure 1, the number of minutes per route for the Fremont Post Office is generally increasing and has consistently exceeded a 480-minute (8 hour) workday. (Figures were unavailable for Irvington Station alone.)

Figure 1



Source: Fremont Post Office budget, FY 85. Accounting periods 13 of FY 84 and FY 85 are Postal Service estimates. No estimate available for accounting period 5 of FY 85.

The amount by which routes exceed 8 hours is increasing from about 1 hour at the end of fiscal year 1983 to a projected 2-1/4 hours by the end of fiscal year 1985. Based on the most recent actual data available, routes averaged 2 hours above the standard by the end of accounting period 5 of fiscal year 1984 (February 17, 1984). According to Fremont postal officials, in the future, the workload for some routes will be shared by 2 employees when the router process is implemented. The router process provides letter carriers whose routes exceed 8 hours with mail sorting assistance to reduce or eliminate the need for overtime without changes in the route. (See p. 20.)

Increasing number of routes qualify for special inspection

A high proportion of Irvington routes are long enough to qualify for special inspection. During three 6-week periods in fiscal years 1983 and 1984, 69 to 84 percent of Irvington routes consistently required at least 8 hours and 30 minutes and therefore qualified for a special inspection (assuming carriers requested one and their performance was judged satisfactory). As table 2 shows, the percentage of qualifying routes is increasing.

Table 2

Routes Qualifying for Special Inspection at Irvington Station^a

<u>Category</u>	<u>6-week period</u>		
	<u>10/2 to 11/12/82</u>	<u>10/1 to 11/11/83</u>	<u>1/21 to 3/2/84</u>
Number of regular routes qualifying	31	37	41
Total number of regular routes	45	49	49
Percentage of routes qualifying	69	76	84

^aAccording to U.S. Postal Service guidelines (Management of Delivery Services Handbook--M-39, page 272).

The number of routes qualifying for a special inspection is increasing despite the evaluations made by local postal management during fiscal year 1983 using the minor adjustment procedure. Local management evaluated 28 routes during fiscal year 1983 and shortened 17. Of the 28, 18 had qualified for a special inspection during the first 6 weeks of fiscal year 1983. A year later, the first 6 weeks of fiscal year 1984, 24 of the 28 routes qualified for a special inspection. This analysis does not prove that the evaluations performed during fiscal year 1983 were inaccurate, since the volume of mail has been increasing. However, it does show that routes evaluated during fiscal year 1983 warranted reevaluation by the beginning of fiscal year 1984--an indication that the minor adjustment procedure is not keeping pace with increased mail volume at Irvington Station.

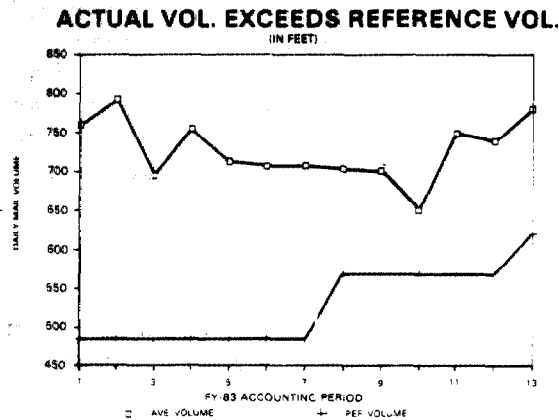
Actual volume substantially exceeds Station's reference volume

Another indication of the excessive length of Irvington routes is that the Station's reference volume--the amount of

mail that can theoretically be handled in an 8-hour workday--is consistently less than the actual volume received by the Irvington Station. Overall, the reference volume for fiscal year 1983 was less than the average actual volume by 200 feet of mail per day.²

As shown in figure 2, according to Fremont records, reference volume (the average amount of mail that all Irvington Station routes could be expected to handle in each workday) at the beginning of fiscal year 1983 was 484 feet, while the actual average daily volume was 759 feet. By the end of fiscal year 1983, the reference volume was 622 feet per day while actual volume averaged 780 feet. Therefore, the volume of mail delivered daily by Irvington carriers exceeded the amount they were expected to deliver by 25 to 57 percent during fiscal year 1983. In reality the difference between reference and actual volume is greater than reflected in postal records because managers used incorrect calculations in establishing reference volumes.

Figure 2



Inappropriate calculation used to set reference volume

When Irvington Station evaluated its routes in fiscal year 1983 under the minor adjustment procedure, it made an incorrect calculation. The procedure includes a calculation of reference volume--the average mail volume that can be sorted and delivered in 8 hours on a given route. The use of an inappropriate calculation for mail sorting in establishing reference volume for

²One foot of mail consists of 195 pieces of mixed first- and third-class letters and flats.

Irvington Station routes resulted in allocating more than 8 hours' work to these routes. Fremont postal managers used 15 minutes per foot for sorting mail instead of the appropriate 18 minutes. Reference volumes were approximately 17 percent higher than they would have been had the 18-minute calculation been used.

Fremont postal officials maintained that the Manager of Delivery and Collections at the Oakland MSC had instructed them to use the 15-minute calculation. However, when we brought this matter to the attention of the Oakland Manager, he said the 18-minute calculation should have been used at Irvington Station.

Carriers and supervisors agree
routes are too long

Most of the carriers we talked to and their supervisors agree that Irvington's routes are too long to complete in 8 hours. Both groups cited the increasing volume of mail as a cause of overlong routes.

Nine of the 11 mail carriers in our random sample stated that their routes were too long to be completed in an 8-hour workday. They cited average workdays ranging from 9 to 11 hours. The other two carriers were satisfied with their routes but commented that mail volume has been increasing. According to the carriers, the factors causing workdays to exceed 8 hours include

- heavy mail volume;
- increased third-class mail volume, including bulk business mail circulars and advertisements;
- beginning deliveries late because of delays in receiving mail from the main Fremont Post Office; and
- the need to provide auxiliary assistance on other routes.

The four delivery service supervisors that have been assigned to Irvington Station since October 1, 1982, generally agreed that Irvington routes were too long and that additional routes were needed. Three of the four stated that most routes were too long to be completed in 8 hours. They believed that an additional 3 to 10 routes were needed to bring the routes within an 8-hour workday. The fourth supervisor agreed that some Irvington Station routes warranted some type of relief but felt that the router process would provide the necessary assistance. (See p. 20.)

Among the factors the supervisors cited as necessitating extra route time were

- increased mail volume,
- an insufficient number of carriers,
- increased carrier sick leave and absenteeism, and
- unsatisfactory carrier performance.

Routes not reviewed

Postal policy and the national agreement emphasize that postal managers must periodically review routes. The first-line delivery supervisor is specifically responsible for monitoring routes daily to determine which routes need an evaluation and possibly an adjustment under the minor adjustment procedure. (See p. 4.) To implement this policy, the Manager of Customer Services at the Fremont Post Office requires that each delivery supervisor record route work hours, volume, and carriers' late leaving and returning time each day on a Postal Service form 3922. In addition, since October 1982 each supervisor has been required to use this information to complete a "Route Analysis and Minor Adjustment" form once a quarter, assessing whether a route is regularly completed in 8 hours.

"Route Analysis and Minor Adjustment" forms were completed for 1 of the 5 quarters since the requirement was instituted. However, they covered only 29 of the 50 Irvington routes for the quarter ending December 1983. Although 16 of the 29 routes had been inspected under the minor adjustment procedure during January-March 1983 (see p. 6), the forms indicated that 24 of the 29 were not regularly completed in 8 hours. By March 1984, 22 of the 24 routes qualified for a special inspection.

Two of the four delivery supervisors assigned to Irvington Station during fiscal year 1983 and 1984 said they were unable to perform the required monitoring because the day-to-day responsibilities of supervising carriers and "moving the mail" took precedence. Without monitoring, specific underlying causes (i.e., carrier workload or inefficiencies) of the continued growth in the length of carrier routes were not determined. As our analysis showed (see p. 14), much of the overtime worked by Irvington carriers fell into the "other" category--meaning that it was primarily used to meet increasing workload.

Additional positions requested

From February 9, 1981, to January 20, 1984, the Fremont postmaster submitted 10 requests to the Oakland MSC for a total of 34 additional full- and part-time letter carrier positions. Among the reasons cited were high carrier overtime rates, a growth in new deliveries, and staff shortages caused by carriers' extended medical absences. Of the 10 requests, 5 were granted in part or full, 3 were denied, and 2 apparently received no response. A total of 10 additional part-time carrier positions were approved.

The Oakland MSC based two of its three staff request denials on its own calculations of Fremont Post Office carrier complement needs. These calculations, however, ignored growth in deliveries and mail volume and staffing changes described by the postmaster in his requests.

WORKLOAD LED TO SUBSTANTIAL
OVERTIME

For most routes at Irvington Station, carriers must often work overtime to deliver all the mail. Overtime at Irvington exceeded goals established by local management during the period of our review. Using overtime instead of additional carriers cost Irvington Station comparatively little but it severely impaired carriers' morale.

Overtime exceeds goals

Overtime rates during the period of our review exceeded planned rates, as well as goals set in the performance contracts of local postal officials. Overtime rates increased from 16.6 percent of total carrier work hours in fiscal year 1983 to 22.3 percent during the first half of fiscal year 1984.

Local management estimates carrier overtime for the coming year as part of an annual budgeting process. Although this planned overtime is not identified in the final budget, it appears on weekly work hour summaries, where it can be compared with actual overtime.

In addition, Irvington Station and Fremont postal managers establish overtime percentage goals as part of an annual objective-setting process. Goals are set for the entire unit's work hours, of which carrier time makes up the bulk.

Actual overtime at Irvington Station exceeded both the planned level for carriers and the managers' overall goals in fiscal year 1983 and continued to overrun fiscal year 1984 plans and goals, as shown in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3Irvington's Planned and Actual Carrier Overtime

	Fiscal Year	
	1983	1984 ^a
	(percent of total work hours)	
Planned overtime	12.6	12.0
Actual overtime	16.6	22.3

^aOctober 1, 1983, to March 16, 1984.

Table 4Overtime Goals and Achievements for Local Officials

	Fiscal year 1983		Fiscal year 1984	
	Goal	Achieved	Goal	Achieved
	----(percent of total work hours)----			
Postmaster	10.0	14.5	12.3	19.2
Customer Services Manager	10.5	15.8	13.5	20.7
Irvington Station Manager	10.5	14.4	b	19.9

^aOctober 1, 1983, to March 16, 1984.

^bThe Station Manager did not set a goal.

The Fremont Postmaster considered his fiscal year 1983 goal unrealistic. He realized it would be unachievable by the third month of the year. He also expects to exceed his current year's goals. He cited several reasons for the high overtime rate: unanticipated increased volume, extended carrier absences and attrition, and his inability to hire necessary additional staff.

According to the Fremont Post Office Customer Services Manager, he and his subordinates set their goals at a level that would support the Postmaster's estimated goal. In fact, the Irvington Station manager simply adopted the Customer Services Manager's goal as his own for fiscal year 1983.

Throughout the period we reviewed, Irvington Station letter carriers consistently worked overtime. During fiscal year 1983, letter carriers averaged 14 hours of overtime per 2-week pay period, while individual carriers averaged from 4 to 28 hours. Overall, overtime worked at Irvington Station in each 4-week accounting period comprised from 11.3 to 19.7 percent of total carrier work hours during fiscal year 1983 and from 19.9 to 23.5 percent during the first half of fiscal year 1984.

Both supervisors' records and officials' statements pointed to high mail volume as the cause of frequent overtime. Delivery service supervisors routinely classify carrier overtime by type. Overtime is broken down into "replacement" overtime--used to meet temporary staff shortages due to illnesses, vacations, or other leave--and "other" overtime--used to accommodate workload fluctuations and various problems not related to absences, such as vehicle breakdowns and inclement weather. During fiscal year 1983, 59 percent of Irvington overtime was classified as "other"; in the first half of 1984, this portion grew to 66 percent. Local postal officials agreed that the high rate of "other" overtime was necessary because the carrier complement was insufficient to handle the volume of mail. They believe that to reduce "other" overtime would require more carriers and routes than are currently authorized.

Overtime costs

From a strictly economic standpoint, overtime costs for fiscal year 1983 could have been reduced, had additional full-time carriers been hired. However, because fringe benefits are not paid on overtime, the difference is not as great as it might at first appear.

According to the Oakland MSC Postmaster, it can be more cost-effective in the long run to pay employees overtime than to hire additional staff. Although overtime is paid at 150 percent of a carrier's regular wage, employee fringe benefits, such as vacation time and health insurance, are not paid on overtime hours. Therefore, the difference between an overtime hour and a regular hour at the Postal Service is not 50 percent, but about 7 to 12 percent, depending on whether the employee is a clerk, mailhandler, or letter carrier.³

Based on our analyses, the additional cost to the Postal Service of all fiscal year 1983 Irvington Station carrier overtime was \$43,365. This additional cost represents the difference between the actual cost of working 22,691 overtime hours at overtime rates and the estimated cost of working these hours at the regular rate plus fringe benefits for a full-time letter carrier.

However, even with optimum staffing and route lengths, some overtime would still be necessary to deal with seasonal fluctuations in mail volume and unforeseen events such as employee

³See Postal Service Needs to Strengthen Controls Over Employee Overtime (GAO/GGD-83-36, Apr. 6, 1983).

illness. Taking local management's planned 12.6-percent overtime rate (percent of total work hours) as a standard for illustrative purposes, the cost to the Postal Service of the additional 5,452 hours of overtime worked would be \$10,686.

Constant overtime causes carrier morale problems

More important than the increase in costs from using overtime instead of additional staff is the damage to the morale of letter carriers. This damage was evident in the lack of volunteers for overtime, which necessitated mandatory overtime; in carriers' advance requests to be excused from work on their scheduled days off; in their submission of medical excuses from overtime; in labor-management relations; and, finally, in carriers' letters to the Subcommittee.

Carriers find overtime burdensome

Of the 11 carriers we selected at random for interviews, 9 considered the overtime demands on them to be excessive. Of the two remaining carriers, one was on a medically restricted work week and the other considered overtime necessary to learn his new route. Although the amount of overtime the carriers were willing to work varied, 5 of the 11 said they would work 1 or 2 hours of overtime 5 days a week if they could be assured of their scheduled days off. The carriers noted a number of effects of working excessive overtime:

- frustration from working 10-hour days and still being unable to deliver all the route's mail;
- physical and mental fatigue;
- family problems;
- cancellation of personal plans resulting from last-minute calls to work on their scheduled days off; and
- medical problems.

Lack of volunteers necessitates mandatory overtime

Although the Postal Service's labor-management agreement calls for overtime to be assigned first to volunteers, the continual need for overtime at Irvington has led carriers to avoid volunteering. Thus, management has had to require overtime.

According to the national agreement between the carriers' union and Postal Service management, carriers may volunteer for overtime each quarter by placing their names on an "Overtime Desired" list. When overtime is necessary, it is first assigned to carriers on the list. If the list does not provide sufficient qualified carriers, carriers not on the list may volunteer. If this does not fulfill overtime needs, carriers are required to work mandatory overtime.

Throughout the period of our review, none of the Irvington Station carriers had placed their name on the overtime desired list. According to the local union president, carriers don't volunteer for overtime because of the inordinate amounts of overtime needed to meet workload demands. Hence, management has had to rely on mandatory overtime, to the extent of requiring carriers to work on their scheduled days off.

Carriers request not
to work on days off

Normally, carriers have Sunday and one other day off each week. The second day off is referred to as a carrier's "scheduled day off" or "nonscheduled day." At Irvington Station, however, carriers often have to forgo their scheduled day off.

Irvington Station records kept since October 17, 1983, show that between that date and February 25, 1984, an average of 23 carriers, or 40 percent of the Irvington Station carrier workforce, worked their scheduled days off each week. In other words, in an average week, about 4 carriers in 10 received only one day off--Sunday.

The situation apparently degenerated to the point that some carriers felt compelled to request, in writing, not to work on the days they were already scheduled to be off to insure that they would in fact not be required to work on that day. According to the Fremont Postmaster, management and the local union agreed to use this procedure.

Carriers obtain medical
excuses from overtime

Another procedure some carriers have used to limit overtime is obtaining a medical excuse. According to the local union president, Irvington Station letter carriers are beginning to obtain medical certification restricting the amount of overtime that management may require them to work. The president told us that this technique is currently limited to Irvington Station carriers; however, he felt that should carriers at the main

Fremont Post Office or other post offices find overtime requirements excessive, the practice could spread.

Four letter carriers at Irvington obtained medical certification limiting the amount of overtime they may work. All of these were Irvington Station carriers during fiscal year 1983; however, one has since transferred to the main Fremont Post Office. Table 5 shows the reasons and conditions given in the medical certifications for limiting the amount of overtime the carrier should work.

Table 5

Carrier Medical Excuses from Overtime

<u>Carrier</u>	<u>Reason</u>	<u>Condition</u>
1	Digital arthritis	Carrier not to work more than 5 days a week or on scheduled days off for approximately 3 months.
2	Emotional disturbances	Restrict carrier work week to 40 hours maximum. Carrier to be reevaluated in 90 days.
3	Adverse effect on health	Restrict work week to 5 days through all of 1984.
4	None given	Restrict work week to no more than 45 hours a week.

In April 1984 one carrier wrote to the Fremont Postmaster:

". . . I can tell you that working 6 days a week 10 hours almost continually since October of 1983 has taken its toll. By the time I get to bed nights, I'm exhausted, so much so that I don't sleep well. It's hard to stand 5 hours casing a route, then leave for the route at 12:30 or 1 p.m. and do your best job. As you quite well know, [my route] is a growing route and 12 hours a day is average."

"I ask you please honor my doctors [sic] request. . . What Dr. . . . had in mind was for me to have my days off. After 17 years and 6 months of good, faithful services [sic] in the Fremont Post Office, I don't think this is too much to ask. Thanks for listening. . . ."

Carriers attempt to hold
management to labor agreement

Another sign of the strain that frequent overtime requirements placed on labor-management relations was a union procedure designed to curtail management violations of national labor agreement provisions limiting overtime. The national agreement states:

"Excluding December, only in an emergency situation will a full-time regular employee be required to work over ten (10) hours in a day or six (6) days in a week. In addition, no full-time regular employee will be required to work overtime on more than five (5) consecutive days in a week."

Violations of these provisions at Irvington led the local union president to seek a means of documenting them. For example, one employee filed a grievance charging that he was required to work 6 consecutive days of overtime. Management denied this grievance and two appeals because the grievant did not orally object to working the sixth consecutive day of overtime. But the grievant had informed management in writing that the day in question was his sixth consecutive day of overtime and he therefore did not desire to work. On July 16, 1983, this grievance was appealed to arbitration where, according to the grievance file, it is still pending, although on May 5, 1984, the grievant resigned from the Postal Service.

Because of such incidents, the local union president directed letter carriers to use specific language on a Postal Service form to document their requests not to work mandatory overtime beyond the amount allowed by the national agreement. According to the union president, management objected to documentation on this form because it provided specific evidence that could be used against management, should violations of the national agreement's overtime provisions be the object of grievances. As a result, the union designed its own form to document carriers' requests that management adhere to the overtime provisions. Carriers desiring not to work excess mandatory overtime fill out the forms and give them to their supervisors. Local union newsletters continue to emphasize the need for such documentation.

Carriers file grievances

From October 1983 through February 1984, Irvington Station letter carriers filed a total of 128 grievances. Although not all grievances can be directly linked to specific overtime situations, postal officials, union representatives, and most

carriers we interviewed agreed that high rates of mandatory overtime resulted in more grievances than would otherwise occur.

According to the national labor agreement, a grievance is a "dispute, difference, disagreement, or complaint" concerning wages, hours, and conditions of employment. The procedures set forth in the agreement include four steps: oral discussion with the immediate supervisor, followed by written appeal at the local, regional, and national level. The union can also request arbitration by a neutral third party at either the regional or national level, depending on the type of grievance.

At Irvington the most frequent issues concerned irregular attendance, overtime, sick leave, and requests for special route inspections. Together, these categories comprised 50 percent of the grievances during the period we reviewed.

On December 29, 1983, 13 Irvington Station letter carriers filed grievances over management's refusal to conduct special inspections of their routes despite Postal Service requirements. Although management denied these grievances at steps 1 and 2 of the grievance process, regional management sustained them. It instructed local management to conduct the special route inspections, since records indicated that the carriers' routes might be too long. However, local management agreed with the local union president to defer the inspections until the router process was implemented. (See below.)

Just as Irvington's mail volume and overtime rates increased from fiscal year 1983 to the first part of fiscal year 1984, so did its rate of grievances. During fiscal year 1983, Irvington Station letter carriers filed 73 grievances, a rate of about 6 grievances a month. During the first 5 months of fiscal year 1984, the rate increased to 11 per month.

Carriers write Subcommittee

By November 1983, morale at Irvington had deteriorated to the point that carriers began to write letters to the House Subcommittee on Postal Operations and Services. During November and December, 11 carriers wrote 13 letters. The carriers typically expressed concern over lengthy routes, mandatory overtime, work on their scheduled days off, disapproval of requested leave, and poor management of carrier operations at Irvington Station. The letters described some of the effects that the above conditions were having on carriers. These included disciplinary actions; poor relations with supervisors; otherwise avoidable motor vehicle accidents; and physical, mental, and emotional problems.

THE ROUTER PROCESS MAY REDUCE OVERTIME

Local postal officials expect the "router process" to eliminate the high rate of overtime at Irvington and its effects on carriers. The router process provides letter carriers whose routes exceed 8 hours with mail sorting assistance to reduce or eliminate the need for overtime without changing the routes themselves. According to postal officials, changing routes is costly and can cause periods of inefficiency because of the need to change letter sorting schemes before the mail reaches the carriers.

At the conclusion of our fieldwork in June 1984, Fremont had begun to implement the router process. In April 1984, the Oakland MSC approved a staff increase of 18 part-time carriers to be used at Fremont and Irvington. Although it is too early to evaluate the process' effectiveness, it appears to have the potential for reducing overtime without readjusting carrier routes.

CONCLUSIONS

Increasing mail volume--coupled with a lack of management attention to route length and overtime rates--aggravated the situation at Irvington Station. By fiscal year 1984 more than one-fifth of carrier hours were overtime.

These high rates of overtime had some monetary cost, but a more serious cost was carrier morale problems. Carriers cited frustration, physical and mental fatigue, family and medical problems, and loss of personal time among the effects of constant mandatory overtime. They employed numerous methods in an effort to limit overtime, including submitting written requests not to work on their scheduled days off; obtaining medical excuses; filing grievances; and, finally, writing to the Subcommittee.

In the spring of 1984, the router process was implemented, giving mail sorting assistance to carriers to reduce the need for overtime. It remains to be seen whether this process will eliminate excessive overtime at Irvington. To keep overtime under control, however, management will have to become more responsive than it has been to increasing mail volume.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To aid in correcting the situation at Irvington Station and to help insure that similar problems at the station do not recur, we are recommending that the Postmaster General direct the Regional Postmaster General, Western Region, to

--comply with Postal Service criteria for route evaluation at Irvington Station and establish work assignments that are as close to 8 hours as possible for each regular letter carrier and

--monitor routes in accordance with postal criteria so that carriers maintain 8-hour work assignments to the extent practicable.

AGENCY COMMENTS

The Postal Service agreed with our conclusions and recommendations. Regarding the excessive use of overtime at Irvington Station, the Service promised to take corrective action consistent with our recommendations. In addition, the Service stated it was going to undertake a comprehensive route and unit review at Irvington Station involving both postal headquarters and regional staff as well as local management.

GRIEVANCES FILED BY IRVINGTON STATION CARRIERS
OCTOBER 1983 THROUGH FEBRUARY 1984

Issue, Number, and Disposition Level of Grievances

1. Discipline grievances^a

Issue	Fiscal year 1983				Fiscal year 1984 (10-1-83 through 2-29-84)				Combined			
	Grievance procedure disposition step			Total	Grievance procedure disposition step			Total	Grievance procedure disposition step			Total
	1	2	3		1	2	3		1	2	3	
Security of the mail	2	-	-	2	1	1	-	2	3	1	-	4
Delay of mail	1	3	-	4	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	4
Obstructing the mail	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Curtailment of mail	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Improper handling of accountable mail	1	3	-	4	1	1	-	2	2	4	-	6
Route deviation and completion	2	1	-	3	1	-	-	1	3	1	-	4
Mail collection testing	1	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	2
Failure to follow instructions	-	5	-	5	-	3	-	3	-	8	-	8
Unsatisfactory performance	2	2	-	4	3	2	1	6	5	4	1	10
Irregular attendance	1	8	4	13	1	4	1	6	2	12	5	19
Safety and accident- related matters	2	3	1	6	2	2	1	5	4	5	2	11
Sexual harrassment	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total discipline grievances	<u>13</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>71</u>

^aDiscipline grievances are generally filed over factual matters involving the appropriateness of disciplinary actions taken by management against an employee.

2. Nondiscipline grievances^a

Issue	Fiscal year 1983						Fiscal year 1984 (10-1-83 through 2-29-84)				Combined					
	Grievance procedure disposition step				Arbitration	Total	Grievance procedure disposition step			Total	Grievance procedure disposition step				Arbitration	Total
	1	2	3	4			1	2	3		1	2	3	4		
Overtime issues	2	1	3	-	3	9	1	5	2	8	3	6	5	-	3	17
Sick leave issues	3	7	2	-	1	13	-	1	1	2	3	8	3	-	1	15
Irregular attendance	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	-	-	2
Light duty assignments	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Improper use of carriers	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Safety matters	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	1
Unprofessional supervisory conduct	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	1
Smoking-related matters	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	1
Removal of a letter casing stool	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	1
Denial of special route inspection request	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	13	-	-	13	-	-	13
Unsatisfactory performance	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	2	-	3	-	-	-	3
Annotation of route leaving and return time	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Total nondiscipline grievances	5	11	6	1	4	27	3	11	16	30	8	22	22	1	4	57
Total discipline grievances	13	28	5	-	-	46	9	13	3	25	22	41	8	-	-	71
Combined total	18	39	11	1	4	73	12	24	19	55	30	63	30	1	4	128

^aNondiscipline grievances are generally filed over alleged violations of the negotiated labor agreement. Such grievances involve matters of labor agreement interpretation and/or application.

Grievances by Type of Disposition

Grievance procedure step	Fiscal year 1983						October 1, 1984 through 2-29-84					Combined					
	Denied	Sustained	Resolved	Withdrawn	Pending	Total	Denied	Sustained ^a	Resolved ^b	Withdrawn	Total	Denied	Sustained	Resolved	Withdrawn	Pending ^c	Total
1	2	4	12	-	-	18	1	-	10	-	11	3	4	22	-	-	29
2	6	9	22	2	-	39	4	5	13	4	26	10	14	35	6	-	65
3	3	1	6	-	1	11	2	14	2	-	18	5	15	8	-	1	29
4	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Arbitration	-	-	-	-	4	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Total	11	15	40	2	5	73	7	19	25	4	55	18	34	65	6	5	128
	===	===	===	==	==	====	==	===	===	==	===	===	===	===	==	==	=====

^aA sustained grievance appeal is one in which the position of the grievant is upheld by management.

^bA resolved grievance appeal is one in which both the grievant or the grievant's representative and management agree on a mutually acceptable solution of the matter in dispute.

^cAs of February 29, 1984.

NINETY-EIGHTH CONGRESS

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TELEPHONE (202) 225-9124

December 19, 1983

Honorable Charles A. Bowsher
Comptroller General of the U.S.
General Accounting Office
441 G Street, N.W., Room 7000-A
Washington, D. C. 20548

Dear Mr. Bowsher:

Within the last few weeks, I have received numerous letters from postal carriers assigned to the Irvington, California (94538) station.

These carriers have written to me as Chairman of the Postal Operations and Services Subcommittee, concerning a variety of problems which can be summarized as follows:

1. forced overtime;
2. inadequate staffing;
3. cancellation of leave time and scheduled days off; and
4. length of carrier routes.

Although the complaints emanate from a single station, I believe the questions raised by these carriers could be indicative of similar problems among carriers throughout the country.

Accordingly, I am requesting GAO to immediately initiate an investigation into the problems cited by these carriers. Moreover, I would like GAO to respond to the following specific questions.

1. What was the total overtime hours worked by Irvington carriers in FY 1983? What was the total amount paid to Irvington carriers for overtime in FY 1983?
2. In your judgement, was it economically more feasible to pay overtime to carriers or to employ additional full-time carriers in the Irvington station?
3. Given the increasing volume of mail, are Irvington carrier routes too long?
4. How often should carrier routes be re-evaluated and changed? What factors are presently considered? What additional factors should be taken into account?

Honorable Charles A. Bowsher
Page Two
December 19, 1983

5. When was the last time carrier routes in Irvington were re-evaluated? Please give details and describe changes in routes.
6. Are the procedures used by the Postal Service to certify carrier routes adequate?
7. In FY 1983, how many grievances were filed by carriers against management at the Irvington station? Please provide a breakdown by category of grievances filed, and status of grievances.

Inasmuch as the issues involve postal carriers exclusively, I would request the GAO to confine its investigation to the carrier craft.

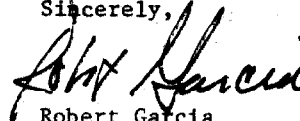
As part of the investigation, I would urge GAO to examine all relevant internal Postal Service records and documents relating to regular and overtime pay, route certifications, leave requests and formal grievances and the disposition of such matters.

Finally, I trust that GAO staff will interview individual carriers as well as management employees in order to present us with a balanced report on the situation in the Irvington station.

We would welcome your recommendations and suggestions for possible legislative initiatives.

If you desire additional information, please have your staff contact Mike Ferrell of the Subcommittee on 225-9124.

Sincerely,



Robert Garcia
Member of Congress

RG:mfd



THE POSTMASTER GENERAL
Washington, DC 20260-0010

February 6, 1985

Dear Mr. Anderson:

This refers to your proposed report entitled, "Letter Carrier's Workload and Overtime Concerns at Irvington Station, Fremont, California.

We agree that the use of overtime at Irvington Station has been excessive and we will take corrective action consistent with your two recommendations.

In addition, we are going to undertake a comprehensive route and unit review at Irvington Station involving both Headquarters and Regional staff as well as local management.

As the report notes, some corrective actions have already begun, and we are confident the situation will soon be greatly improved.

We appreciate your recommendations and the opportunity to comment on your report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul N. Carlin". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Paul N. Carlin

Mr. William J. Anderson
Director, General
Government Division
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D. C. 20548-0001

(223300)









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