



FINDINGS

Only 1 in 5 first responders seek and receive adequate help for a mental health condition.

Service use and help-seeking experiences of Australian first responders with mental health conditions

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First responders are at high risk of mental health conditions. Moreover, unacceptably low numbers of personnel either seek or receive adequate help for these conditions. Organisation-provided services have a low take-up rate and are perceived as of low usefulness.

Introduction

Early and appropriate treatment is paramount in preventing and treating mental health conditions in first responders. This study aimed to identify associations between mental health help-seeking behaviour and the demographic, employment characteristics, and mental health of Australian first responders.

Methods

Data from Answering the Call, the Australian national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of police and emergency services, was analysed to determine mental health help-seeking associations, as well as to measure patterns of service use. This encompassed 14,868 employees across 33 organisations in the ambulance, fire and rescue, police, and state emergency services sectors.

Results

Over half of employees needing help for a mental health issue neither sought nor received help, and only one fifth actually received adequate levels of help. This experience was common across all sectors. First responders with severe mental distress who delayed seeking help reported that they needed a lot more help than they received. Poor mental health help-seeking behavior and experiences were associated with high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and psychological distress. For organization-provided services and programs, usage levels and perceptions of usefulness were low across all emergency services sectors.

Discussion

Findings support the importance of early intervention and help-seeking amongst first responders with emergency mental health conditions.

- Personnel across all emergency services sectors exhibited sub-optimal help-seeking behaviours and experiences. This means the causes may go beyond the organisational structures, policies, and programs of any individual sector and are likely to be systemic.
- Those needing help the most, were the least likely to seek it. Mental health literacy levels need to be improved so that people can identify symptoms of emerging mental health problems, and understand the importance of early help-seeking.
- Low take-up of wellbeing services and programs provided by organisations indicates a need for widespread review and improvement. While other barriers to seeking help may also be at play (e.g., concerns about confidentiality), the low levels of perceived usefulness of these services means they are not seen as effective or worthwhile.

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Tables and figures

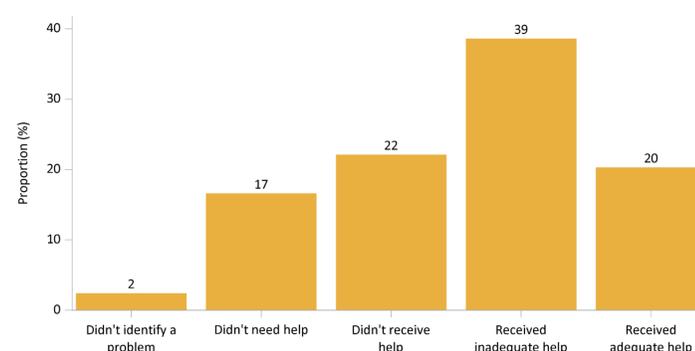


Figure 1: Perceived need for help by first responders with PTSD

Perceived need for help by first responders by severity of PTSD

PTSD Severity	n	Did not have a problem	Did not need help	Did not seek or receive help	Sought help
Sub-threshold (%)	1570	9.3	24.5	19.7	46.5
Mild (%)	612	4.0	23.7	22.4	50.0
Moderate (%)	369	2.2	16.9	21.7	59.2
Severe (%)	407	0.2	5.9	22.0	71.9