

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF FIRST RESPONDERS



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This pioneering Australian research is part of the *National mental health and wellbeing study of police and emergency services*, initiated by mental health organisation Beyond Blue, with support from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

It has three key phases:

- Phase one – a qualitative project gathering the personal mental health experiences of current and former employees of police and emergency services, their partners and families.
- Phase two – the first national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of police and emergency services personnel, titled *Answering the call*.
- Phase three – a collaborative project that helps police and emergency service communities to optimise their mental health by translating into action the evidence from the police and emergency service program.

This *Hazard Note* focuses on phase two, *Answering the call*, for which Beyond Blue commissioned the University of Western Australia, which partnered with Roy Morgan Research to conduct the survey.

SUMMARY

Answering the call established a national, representative picture of the prevalence of

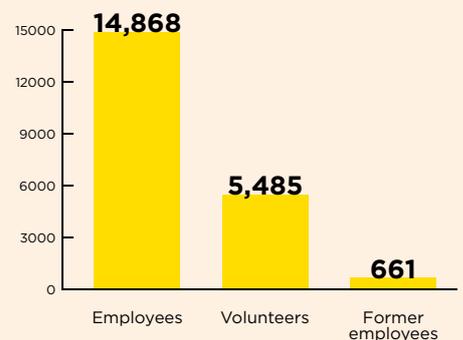
Who participated in this research?

21,014

total survey participants from 33 agencies



38% Employees worked outside major capital cities



77% Volunteers worked outside major capital cities

▲ Figure 1: WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH?

mental health conditions, suicidal ideation (suicidal thoughts) and attempts, stigma, use of support services, risk and protective factors and individual knowledge and behaviour factors across Australian police and emergency service personnel. More than 21,000 current and former employees, and volunteers, were surveyed. The research found that police and emergency service personnel are deeply impacted by both their work and their work environments. Key results are:

- One in three employees experience high or very high psychological

distress, compared to just over one in eight of all Australian adults.

- Almost one in 2.5 employees and one in three volunteers had been diagnosed with a mental health condition at some point, compared to one in five of all Australian adults.
- Employees and volunteers are more than twice as likely to report having had suicidal thoughts than adults in the general population and are more than three times more likely to have a suicide plan, despite comparable rates of suicide attempts.

CONTEXT

Despite extensive, anecdotal evidence that police and emergency services personnel are at greater risk of experiencing a mental health condition, until now, no comprehensive, national data existed. This data void has created challenges in understanding the true extent of mental health issues in the sector and in advocating

for genuine reform and change. This landmark research, for the first time, provides a detailed and accurate picture of these issues.

The results of this research have established national baseline measures of wellbeing, mental health conditions and suicide risk among police and emergency services personnel. They also provide

evidence about the issues affecting their health and the best ways to provide support.

BACKGROUND

At the time of the survey, there were 117,500 employees and 237,800 volunteers in the participating agencies. Police agencies employed two thirds of the sector's paid workforce, while more than 85% of volunteers

were affiliated with fire and emergency service agencies.

The workforce is geographically dispersed with 38% of employees and 77% of volunteers working outside major capital cities. Most employees worked in operational roles, 20% of employees worked in non-operational roles, and 15% worked in roles that have both non-operational and operational aspects.

Most respondents see their work as a career, with a high proportion of employees having worked for their agency for more than 10 years. Many volunteers also make long-term commitments to their agencies. Most employees work full time, and most do shift work or are on call. Within the ambulance sector, 68% of employees were doing rotating shift work or a combination of shift work and being on call at other times. One third of fire and emergency service employees and 40% of police employees were doing rotating shift work. Around a quarter of full-time employees usually work more than 45 hours per week.

RESEARCH

Answering the call was conducted from October 2017 to March 2018. The scope of the survey included current employees (operational and non-operational), current volunteers, and former/retired employees working in ambulance, fire, police, and state emergency service agencies in each Australian state and territory. Of the 36 agencies in the sector, 33 participated in *Answering the call*.

With the assistance of each agency, a random sample based on defined workforce demographics (stratified random sample) of their current employees and volunteers was selected (or full censuses in smaller agencies) and contacted via email to participate in the online survey.

In total, 14,868 employees and 5,485 volunteers participated in the survey. In addition, a sample of 661 former employees was recruited through associations of former employees and related groups. The total number of survey respondents was 21,014.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Many of the most significant key messages and findings from nine survey themes are summarised here.

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Key messages

Despite the higher rates of psychological

distress, probable PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and suicidal thoughts and planning compared to the general population, many employees have good levels of positive mental health and wellbeing, resilience and low levels of distress.

Key findings

- Ten per cent of employees had probable PTSD. Rates of PTSD ranged from 6% in the state emergency services sector, to 8% in ambulance, 9% in fire and rescue, and 11% in police. In comparison, the prevalence of PTSD has been estimated at 4% in adults in Australia and 8% in the Australian Defence Force.
- Twenty one per cent of employees had high psychological distress and 8% had very high psychological distress – much higher than the 9% and 4% respectively among all adults in Australia, and the 9% and 4% respectively of personnel in the Australian Defence Force.
- Thirty nine per cent of employees and 33% of volunteers reported having been diagnosed with a mental health condition in their life by a mental health professional, compared to 20% of all adults in Australia.

Volunteers showed lower levels of psychological distress and probable PTSD and higher levels of positive wellbeing than employees.

- Four per cent of ambulance volunteers, 5% of fire volunteers and 6% of state emergency service volunteers had probable PTSD.

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIOURS

Key messages

Suicidal thoughts and planning were twice as common in the police and emergency services sector as in the Australian population, while rates of suicide attempts were comparable.

Employees with higher levels of social support and resilience reported lower levels of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, even if they had experienced traumatic events that deeply affected them in their work or were likely to have PTSD.

Key findings

- The rate of self-reported suicide attempts was comparable between police and emergency services employees and volunteers, and adults in the general population.

INDIVIDUAL RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Key messages

Employees and volunteers in the early stages of their career (less than two years) had high levels of mental wellbeing and very low levels of psychological distress, probable PTSD and suicidal thoughts.

Higher rates of psychological distress and probable PTSD were associated with greater length of service, low levels of social support and more exposure to traumatic events that deeply affected individuals.

Employees and volunteers who reported strong social support mechanisms, maintaining healthy levels of physical activity, and obtaining regular good sleep, had higher levels of mental wellbeing.

Key findings

- Psychological distress was almost twice as high among those who had spent 10 or more years in the service when compared to those who had spent less than two years in the service (32% and 17% respectively).
- More than 80% of employees and 90% of volunteers reported both providing high levels of social support to others, as well as receiving similar support.
- Nearly one in five employees and one in 10 volunteers get poor quality sleep.

SUBSTANCE USE

Key messages

Many police and emergency services employees reported high rates of alcohol consumption, which may indicate its use for coping with stress or other symptoms of poor mental health. Personnel with probable PTSD or high levels of psychological distress had the highest rates of harmful levels of drinking.

Key findings

- Almost 50% of employees' alcohol consumption exceeded National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines. Sixteen per cent of employees drank five or more drinks in a single session at least weekly, and 17% drank 10 or more drinks in a single session in the past month.
- Rates of illicit drug use were comparatively low. About 5% of employees reported having used illicit drugs within the past year, although 13% of employees with probable PTSD reported having done so. This

Prevalence of mental health and wellbeing

10%

of employees had probable PTSD



State emergency services



Ambulance



Fire and rescue



Police

5%

of volunteers had probable PTSD



State emergency service volunteers



Ambulance volunteers



Fire volunteers

▲ Figure 2: PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

compares with 16% of Australians aged 14 or older who reported using illicit drugs within a 12 month period as part of the 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Key messages

The workplace environment, particularly team culture and workplace stress factors, such as inadequate resources and unpaid overtime, had significant impacts on the mental health of employees.

Workplaces that provided sufficient opportunity to recover after stressful events, and had lower levels of gossip, stigma and bullying and higher levels of support and inclusiveness, had lower levels of psychological distress and PTSD and higher levels of resilience.

Key findings

- Three per cent of employees and 1% of volunteers reported experiencing frequent, high-stress bullying, and 8% of employees and 2% of volunteers reported infrequent, high-stress bullying. About half of those exposed to high-stress bullying had high or very high levels of psychological distress.
- In agencies with higher average levels of resilience, more employees were able to take time off after experiencing a traumatic event at work (76%), more frequently had debriefings (74%) and reported that work did not drain so

much energy as to affect their private life (83%).

- About half of employees had been involved in an incident that was the subject of a formal investigation or inquiry, and about one in five had been involved in an incident that received adverse attention in the media. These events were often associated with higher levels of psychological distress.

STIGMA

Key messages

Employees and volunteers tended to believe that others in the workplace held negative beliefs towards those with a mental health condition or a low commitment to support those with mental health conditions.

Key findings

- Employees held notable levels of stigma surrounding their own mental health (self-stigma), such as the amount of shame they had about their mental health condition (33%), the amount of burden it causes those around them (32%) and avoiding telling people about their mental health condition (61%).
- Most employees and volunteers reported they would support any colleague who experienced a mental health condition. For example, a very low number of employees and volunteers believed that mental health conditions are the fault of the individual suffering from them (1%) and mental health conditions were a burden

on others (2%).

- Employees needing support were more likely to seek it through their agency if they felt that there were lower levels of stigma within their workplace.

SEEKING SUPPORT

Key messages

More people in the police and emergency services sector seek support when they need it for a mental health condition than in the Australian population overall.

Barriers to seeking support commonly cited, for employees and volunteers alike, included wanting to deal with it themselves, concerns about being treated differently or being perceived as weak. Employees were also worried about harming their career prospects or being removed from operational work.

Key findings

- About half of employees (47%) who received support or treatment felt they received sufficient support for their needs. While this may seem low, it is comparable with the general population (45%).
- More than 25% of employees with high or very high distress and about 18% of employees with probable PTSD acknowledged that they had an emotional or mental health issue but did not feel that they needed any support. In addition, more than 20% of employees with probable PTSD perceived a need for support but either did not seek it or did not receive any support.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION

Key messages

Most respondents making workers' compensation claims found the process to be unsupportive, stressful and that it had a negative impact on their recovery.

Key findings

- About 14% of employees had made a workers' compensation claim as a result of trauma, stress or a mental health condition sustained during workplace duties.
- Among employees with probable PTSD who made a claim, 75% felt it had a negative impact on their recovery with only 8% reporting a positive impact on their recovery. More than half (52%) felt that they were not supported at all during the claims experience, and 63% reported that they found the claims experience to be very or extremely stressful.

FORMER EMPLOYEES

Key messages

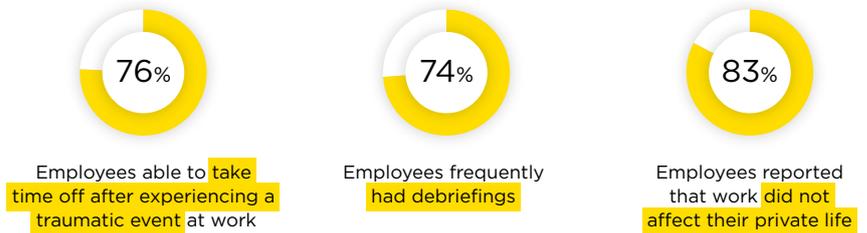
Former employees who participated in the survey had high rates of probable PTSD, psychological distress and suicidal thoughts.

Former employees had lower resilience and were much less likely to receive high levels of social support compared with current employees - particularly those former employees currently having probable PTSD or high rates of psychological distress.

Key findings

- Twenty eight per cent of former employees had seriously thought about taking their own life. Of those, 66% felt this way while still working in the police and emergency services sector and 62% felt this way after

Employees in agencies with higher average levels of resilience:



▲ Figure 3: RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT.

leaving the sector.

- Former employees reported lower levels of social support compared with current employees, particularly those former employees identified as having probable PTSD or high rates of psychological distress. Just over half of former employees (56%) have high levels of both providing social support to others and receiving social support from others.

HOW THE RESEARCH IS BEING USED

The research results are the basis for recommendations by Beyond Blue to emergency service agencies and governments. The research is also being translated into action as part of phase three of the project.

A major recommendation is that agencies review their existing health and wellbeing strategies to ensure that they have a comprehensive workplace mental health and wellbeing strategy that is a fully integrated element of their core business. Further recommendations suggest guiding principles

for agencies, for example, that this strategy should promote the benefits of social support to ensure personnel are protected from suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These results form a baseline that can be used for future research, both nationally and by each individual agency. This research provides an opportunity for police and emergency service agencies to develop, refine and implement strategies and programs that can minimise the long term mental health impacts for future employees and volunteers, who are the future workforce for providing essential emergency services to our communities.

FURTHER READING

Answering the call - national survey (2018), Beyond Blue's National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services - full report. www.beyondblue.org.au/pesresearch

The Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC is a national research centre funded by the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centre Program. It was formed in 2013 for an eight-year program to undertake end-user focused research for Australia and New Zealand.

Hazard Notes are prepared from available research at the time of publication to encourage discussion and debate. The contents of *Hazard Notes* do not necessarily represent the views, policies, practises or positions of any of the individual agencies or organisations who are stakeholders of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

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