




Impact Case Study

Victorian Police and Mental Health

Burnout


Introduction

 Emergency services workers are known to face the highest levels of burnout, with paramedics, fire fighters and police officers in the top tiers of workers facing the potentially life-threatening consequences. The daily routines of these workers bring them into constant contact with people at the extreme ranges of physical and mental suffering – which has detrimental effects on their own wellbeing.

Burnout for emergency services workers consists of numerous factors: from heavy workloads arising from long shifts and irregular hours, lack of rest or breaks, and the job's physical demands, to witnessing or being the target of violence, insufficient career recognition, and restricted time for social interaction with family and friends.

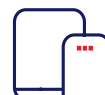
As a result, these workers often have low rates of job satisfaction and significant levels of fatigue, as well as higher rates of divorce, depression and suicide.

Background

 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on policing and society as a whole has contributed to a challenging period for the members of Police Association of Victoria (PAV). Recruitment and retention have been a particular challenge for Victorian police, but not enough is known of the views and experiences of Victoria's police workforce during this period.

To fill this gap, members from RMIT's Centre for Organisations and Social Change (COSC) set out to examine the attitudes and experiences of the working lives of PAV members during and post COVID-19, to determine their wellbeing and their workplace climate, with a focus on work intensification, low job satisfaction and intention to leave.

The Research

 To discover and analyse the attitudes of PAV members to their work and their job satisfaction, the team, led by COSC member Professor Timothy Bartram, and including Professor Peter Holland (Swinburne), Dr Patricia Pariona Cabrera (RMIT), Dr Tse Leng Tham (ESCP Business School) and Professor Kerstin Alfes (ESCP Business School) – conducted an independent online survey of 1,093 PAV members over a six-week period during May and June 2023. The survey examined their wellbeing (their workload, psychological safety and distress, engagement, burnout, resilience, violence, job satisfaction and job turnover) and workplace environment (their employee voice, employee silence, work-life balance, support at work, trust in direct supervisor and senior management, and trade union partnership).



The findings

The survey found that PAV members were experiencing a difficult work environment, with intensified workloads and low job satisfaction. The majority of members often felt emotionally drained and around two thirds (67%) reported that they had reached the point of burnout, defined as “a condition where an individual feels overextended and depleted of their emotional, mental, and physical resources as a result of the work that they are engaged in” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Specifically:

- COVID-19 had negatively impacted members’ psychological and mental health.
- only 23% of respondents felt that their work unit’s practices valued work-life balance.
- 64% did not feel confident that senior management treated them fairly.
- 58% frequently thought about leaving the police workforce.
- 21% reported they were likely or very likely to leave the police workforce in the next year.

Despite these challenges:

- 64% felt that their co-workers helped them to cope with job stress.
- 61% of respondents felt confident that their direct supervisor would always try to treat them fairly and 25% of those surveyed felt that their direct supervisors would either often or always help them feel better about stressful situations at work.

Policing is an inherently tough and demanding job, but the overarching theme of the report is that police workers are reaching their limits. Initiatives must be adopted that will restore and replenish the physical and psychological wellbeing of policing staff.

Project outcomes

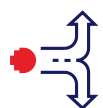


The report *Findings from the Survey on Workplace Wellbeing and Environment Police Association of Victoria (Part One)* was provided to the Police Association Victoria in August 2023. Part Two of the report was delivered to the PAV in December 2023.

Since delivering the report, its results have been discussed in the media, including in newspapers and on radio 3AW. Articles include:

- *Thin blue line getting thinner as force faces mass exodus*, by Kaitlyn Smith, Herald Sun, October 2023.
- *Alarming research warns of Victoria Police mass exodus*, Ross and Russ (audio), 3AW, 15 September 2023.

Next Steps



As a result of the research, Police Association Victoria is looking at how to address the issues affecting its members.

The Centre for Organisations and Social Change is investigating possible follow-up research with the Police Association Victoria in 2024.

COSC Research Theme

- Health, wellbeing and organisations

This theme explores how organisations can promote and improve health and wellbeing as well as organisational responses to health and social problems.