

# POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUNG ADULT FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE PERSONNEL



## RAPID REVIEW AND DATASET REANALYSIS: KEY FINDINGS FACT SHEET

The present investigation aimed to develop an understanding, based on a review of international literature and on Australian based population data, of the experiences of mental health and wellbeing of young adult fire and emergency service personnel, along with the risk and protective factors that contribute to mental health in this cohort.

The rapid evidence review involved screening over 6000 research studies from diverse samples that investigated mental health in fire and emergency service personnel. Of these, only 13 provided data on young adult personnel, indicating that this age group is seriously underrepresented in fire and emergency services mental health research. The data reanalysis of young fire and rescue and SES volunteers was undertaken using the Answering the Call study (1), and of young firefighters using the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service Health and Wellbeing study (2).

### Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns

International research across diverse samples indicated that many young emergency service personnel show elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and post traumatic stress symptoms.



In Australia, high levels of psychological distress are experienced by 1 in 3 young fire and rescue and SES volunteers (1), and 1 in 6 young firefighters (2). Young volunteers had the highest rate (8.5%) of probable PTSD (as measured by self-reported PTSD scores above a cut-off, indicating PTSD), compared to 4.7% of older volunteers and 4.4% of Australian adults (1).



Moderate depression symptoms were reported by 1 in 3 young firefighters, compared to 1 in 5 older firefighters (2). Almost half of young firefighters reported at least mild symptoms of anxiety, compared to 1 in 6 older adults reporting mild symptoms.

### Stressful Events

Around 1 in 4 young volunteers have experienced **one or more stressful events** that affected them deeply during the course of their volunteering (1). More than 4 in 5 experienced at least one stressful event (2).



### Mental Health Literacy

Almost 1 in 4 young volunteers experiencing mental health concerns **do not perceive that they have a problem requiring support**. Improving mental health literacy may be an important step towards supporting volunteer mental health.



### Perceived need for help

Despite high levels of psychological distress, a majority (64%) of **young volunteers reported no functional impact of this distress** (1), and a majority (78.9%) of young firefighters reported their career was 'not at all' impacted by mental health (2). 1 in 4 young volunteers with probable PTSD reported awareness of their mental health

concerns, but **did not believe they needed help or support** (1), suggesting the importance of promoting early intervention for mental health. 14% sought help but needed more support, and 26.9% received sufficient help. All young firefighters reported that **mental health concerns would not prevent them from serving** as a firefighter (2).

### Risk Factors

International evidence suggests that there are multiple risk factors for mental health in young emergency service personnel. Individual risk factors include childhood trauma, lower self-worth, lower education, younger age, and regular consumption of alcohol. Social risk factors include **lower levels of social support from friends and family**.

Greater perceived work stress, and not accessing psychological support at work were predictors of depression and PTSD.



### Protective Factors

International evidence found multiple protective factors for mental health in young emergency service personnel or volunteers. Individual factors included higher levels of resilience, and the personality factor of conscientiousness.

**Higher levels of support from friends** was identified as a social protective factor.



### Importance of this study

This knowledge synthesis uncovered several important points. Firstly, young adult emergency service personnel and volunteers are an extremely underrepresented population in the international research literature, highlighting the need for research in this age group.

Secondly, the existing Australian evidence suggests that this population experiences high levels of psychological distress and probable PTSD, however despite this, do not perceive they have a problem and/or do not seek help.

Interestingly, international research findings suggest that those with past trauma experiences may be drawn to emergency services roles. This has important implications, given that previous lifetime trauma is a risk factor for mental health concerns.



1. Beyond Blue Ltd. Answering the call national survey, Beyond Blue's National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services - Final report. 2018.  
2. Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies. MFS Health & Wellbeing Study. 2017.