

Blue Light: Research Briefing (No. 1)

March 2015

Mind's aim is for everyone with a mental health problem to get both support and respect. We recognise that effectively managing workplace wellbeing is critical to achieving this. Emergency services ('Blue Light') personnel operate in one of the most challenging workplace environments but currently receive limited mental health support.

With £4 million Libor funding, administered by the Cabinet Office, Mind is developing an ambitious programme to improve the mental health of emergency services personnel in England. More information can be found here: www.mind.org.uk/bluelight

Between 5th December 2014 and 12th January 2015, Mind ran an online survey to better understand experiences of mental health problems within the emergency services. We also ran a series of focus groups in different regions of the country. These brought together personnel from all four services to discuss mental health needs and types of support. This is the first summary of our research findings. We will be releasing more detail about our research over the next few months.

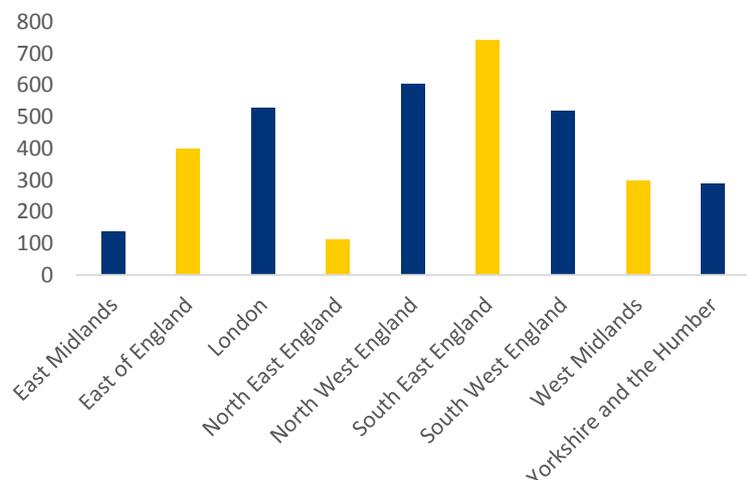
“We're a ‘fix it’ organisation, we deal with the short term. Someone on a bridge, or in a siege, we fix that. We don't understand the longevity of their illness. When you feel you can't fix your own staff or yourself, we can't deal with it well.”

Headlines

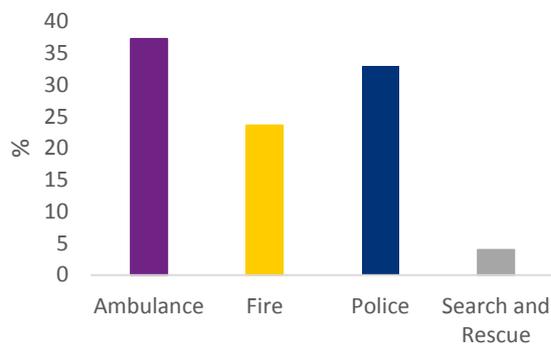
- Emergency services personnel are more likely to experience a mental health problem but they are less likely to take time off work as a result (compared to the general workforce).
- 87.57% of personnel said they had experienced stress and poor mental health whilst working for Blue Light services.
- Emergency services personnel work hard to prevent their mental health problems affecting their performance, but this comes at a large personal cost (including relationship breakdown and effects on physical health).
- Search & Rescue personnel report much better levels of mental health and mental health support than the other Blue Light services. Some respondents said that their voluntary role improved their mental health because it provided purpose and comradeship.

Respondent Demographics

Our survey received 3,627 responses from emergency services personnel in England. This represents approximately 1.5% of the country's total 'Blue Light' workforce. We received a strong response from all regions of England. Despite the differences in operating contexts and support provision, there is striking consistency in survey responses across the regions.



Total Respondents (Base 3,627)



When we asked respondents whether they had ever heard of Mind, the recognition rate was only slightly higher than our regular tracking of the general population. This implies that we did not just talk to the most engaged personnel. Respondents also represented a good range of roles, management status, and length of service. However, they were not strictly representative of the whole workforce. For example, 32.9% of survey participants were from the police but this service employs about 60% of emergency services personnel. In total, we received 1,352 responses from ambulance; 1,194 from police; 857 from fire; and 143 from search & rescue.

Survey respondents also reported a very high rate of lived experience of mental health problems (55.11%) and mental health service use (27.43%). Between 12.77% and 15.14% of respondents rated their current mental health as 'poor' or 'very poor'. This represents both a greater level of need and the self-selecting sample. We are carrying out additional research to investigate this further.

Respondents were overwhelmingly white; this lack of diversity is a mirror of the emergency services nationally. Less than 3% of our survey respondents were from a BME community. We are carrying out targeted research to better understand the needs of this group.

Mental Health at Work

Emergency services respondents reported a very high rate of lived experience (55.11%) and mental health service use (27.43%), well above the level of the general population. However, search & rescue personnel reported much better levels of current and historical mental health. This reflects the voluntary nature of many search & rescue roles, where it is easier to opt-out or take time off.

87.57% of respondents had experienced stress, low mood, or poor mental health whilst working for Blue Light services, but they were less likely than the general workforce to take time off work as a result. The majority of respondents said that they had never taken sickness absence from work for those reasons.

The Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) have also carried out a survey to investigate the mental health of the general workforce. We used their results as a general population benchmark to compare against our results. Just 43% of emergency service personnel said they have taken time off work due to poor mental health. The CIPD has found that this figure is much higher among the general workforce, with nearly three in five (57%) saying they had needed time off for poor mental health.

In our focus groups, participants spoke about their fear of stigma. They would often report in sick with 'flu' rather than discuss their mental health problems. Participants also discussed the high personal cost of their work-related mental health problems. Many said that they had lost relationships and others reported large effects on their physical health, finances, and family.

“I was still able to perform, but only because I made myself, I often used to find a place alone between tasks and simply burst into tears, before picking myself up and going on.”

Conclusion

Our survey shows that there is a very high level of mental health need among the emergency services. Not only are a large number of personnel struggling with their mental health, but they are less likely to seek support or take time off when they are sick. The survey has also revealed important differences between the services that will help us to develop a programme of support that is accessible and effective for all. Whilst this first set of survey findings are clear, we also recognise that a number of groups were under-represented in our sample. We are carrying out targeted research to better understand the needs of search & rescue and BME personnel. We will be publishing these results and other findings from our research over the next few months.