

# REDUCING BURNOUT & RESIGNATIONS AMONG 911 DISPATCHERS

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IN A FIELD EXPERIMENT WITH 9 US CITIES, WE FOUND THAT A LOW-COST PROGRAM AIMED AT AFFIRMING SOCIAL BELONGING SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED BURNOUT AND RESIGNATIONS AMONG 911 DISPATCHERS.

## The challenge

Burnout -- a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress -- is widespread across the U.S. workforce. In fact, burnout affects one in two front line workers across the U.S. The negative impacts of burnout are also widespread. Burnout is costly not only for workers who experience it, but also for their agencies and society at large.

911 dispatchers, in particular, are at high risk of burnout because they work long hours, with limited breaks, and have to make life-or-death decisions in split seconds for hundreds of callers each day. As such, rates of burnout, absenteeism, and turnover are very high among 911 dispatchers. However, while evidence of burnout among front line workers is well-documented, we have very little evidence about what works to reduce it.

## What we did

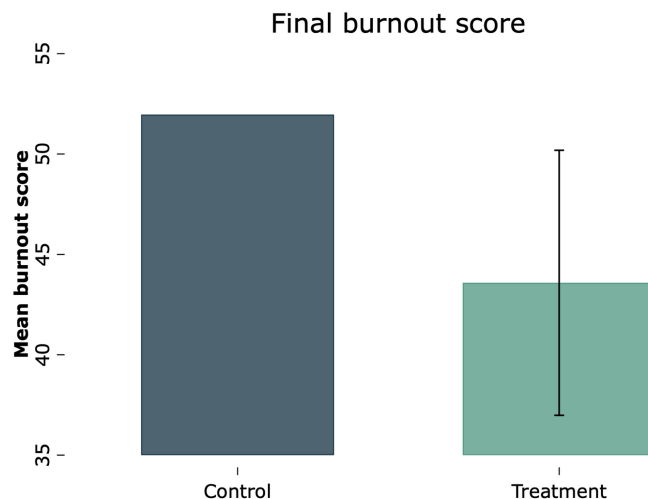
In collaboration with the Behavioral Insights Team and 9 U.S. cities, we conducted a field experiment aimed to test a low-cost approach to reducing burnout. Our goal was to test whether increasing social support and affirming social belonging for 911 dispatchers could lead to reductions in burnout, as well as impact absenteeism and turnover.

We co-designed a 6-week program that gave 911 dispatchers across all 9 cities an opportunity to share their stories, experiences, and advice anonymously on an online platform. In fall 2017 (September-November or October-December, depending on the city), dispatchers in the treatment group received a weekly email from a supervisor or agency head that nudged them to reflect on how they could support new hires, and how they were connected to other dispatchers.

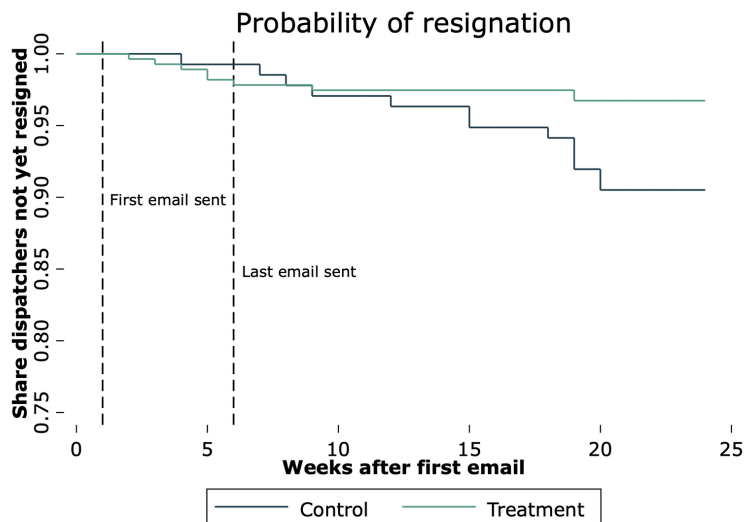
The email they received also included a story from another dispatcher, so that even if the dispatcher didn't want to share their own experience, they knew that they belonged to a professional group that had similar experiences. Immediately after the program ended, and four months post-intervention, we measured changes in burnout, sick leave and turnover.

## Our findings

Four months post-intervention, we observed significant reductions in both burnout and turnover. In fact, burnout was 8 points lower for the dispatchers in the treatment group, a magnitude equivalent to the difference in burnout scores between social workers and administrative staff in a hospital setting.



Four months post-intervention, we also found resignations had been cut by more than half. We did not observe a change in sick leave.



## Next steps

Our study has important implications for 911 dispatchers and the broader frontline workforce. Our project demonstrates that even low-cost tweaks to work environments can have meaningful impacts on front line worker burnout. Not only can strengthening social belonging and social support help front line workers, it can also be a very cost-effective strategy to improve retention for agencies.

The People Lab is now running additional experiments with other front line workers to measure whether this approach can be effective in other contexts and whether reducing burnout in front line workers improves service delivery and performance.



## Additional resources

View media coverage:

- [A Burnout Crisis Hits Government](#)
- [Reducing 911 Dispatcher Burnout & Turnover Through Behavioral Insights](#)
- [Questioning Behavior Podcast ft. People Lab Co-Director Elizabeth Linos](#)

Read more about our work:

- [Project page](#)

Related research on burnout:

- [Reducing Burnout and Resignations among Frontline Workers: A Field Experiment](#)
- [Anxiety Levels Among Physician Mothers During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

## ABOUT US

The People Lab aims to transform the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people in government and the communities they serve. We collaborate with governments and other stakeholders to evaluate strategies that can strengthen the public-sector workforce, improve public service delivery, and foster an engaged democracy. Our team brings together public management scholars, behavioral economists, political scientists and public policy experts who are committed to evidence-based policy making, and who use rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and experimental methods to better understand what works. All projects are co-designed with our partners to ensure feasibility and scalability.