



# GOVERNMENT WORKERS & THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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IN SURVEYS OF OVER 6000 GOVERNMENT WORKERS DURING THE FIRST HEIGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WE FOUND THAT 1 IN 3 WORKERS ARE BURNT OUT, 1 IN 4 REPORT MODERATE TO SEVERE ANXIETY, AND 1 IN 5 ARE EXPERIENCING COMPASSION FATIGUE. IMPORTANTLY, WE FOUND THAT PUBLIC EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN GOVERNMENT, THEIR PEERS, AND THEIR CLIENTS ARE STRONGLY ASSOCIATED WITH HOW BURNT OUT AND ANXIOUS THEY FEEL DURING THIS CRISIS.

## The challenge

Workers on the front line of the Covid-19 pandemic response are facing severe psychological distress. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health status of healthcare and other essential workers have been well-documented. Yet public sector workers responding to the Covid-19 pandemic outside of the health sphere are also confronting a mental health crisis.

As governments continue to adjust their operations in response to the pandemic, public servants have seen job demands increase and caseloads sky-rocket while adapting to shifting responsibilities, deployment into new roles, new remote work environments, and financial strain as a result of being furloughed. Government workers are facing a heightened risk for burnout, anxiety and compassion fatigue -- the costs of which extend beyond the individual, as government workers' mental health can have meaningful impacts on the quality of services, how they are delivered and who receives them.

## What we did

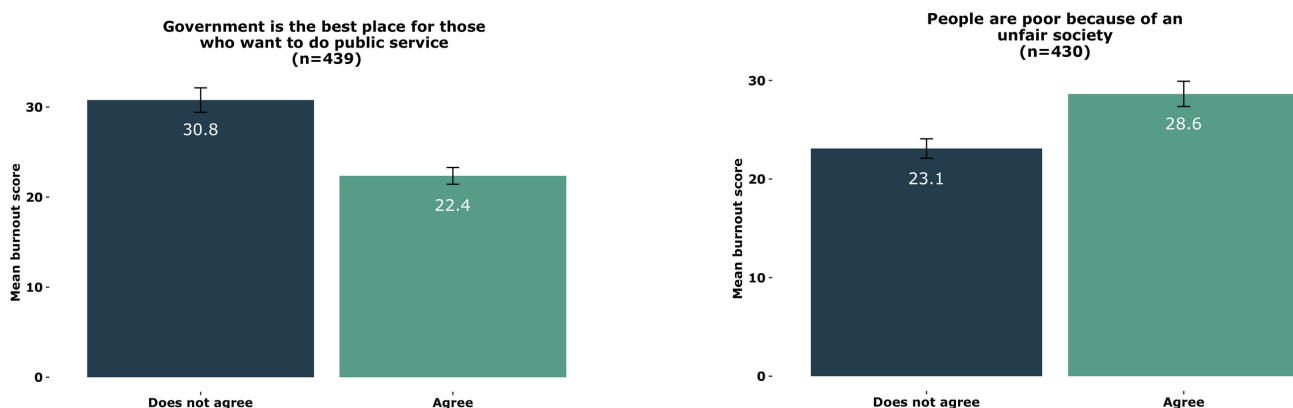
In collaboration with a mid-sized city and a State unemployment agency, we set out to better understand how Covid-19 has impacted the mental health of their own government employees. Our goal was to determine the extent to which government workers are facing intensified mental health stressors and what factors predict this experience.

We conducted a series of online surveys to measure rates and predictors of anxiety, burnout, and compassion fatigue, reaching a total of 6,150 government workers in 45 departments in April and May of 2020. We measured how changes in responsibilities, perceptions about roles in public service, colleagues, and views of individuals served by government programs influenced rates of anxiety, burnout and compassion fatigue among public servants.

## Our findings

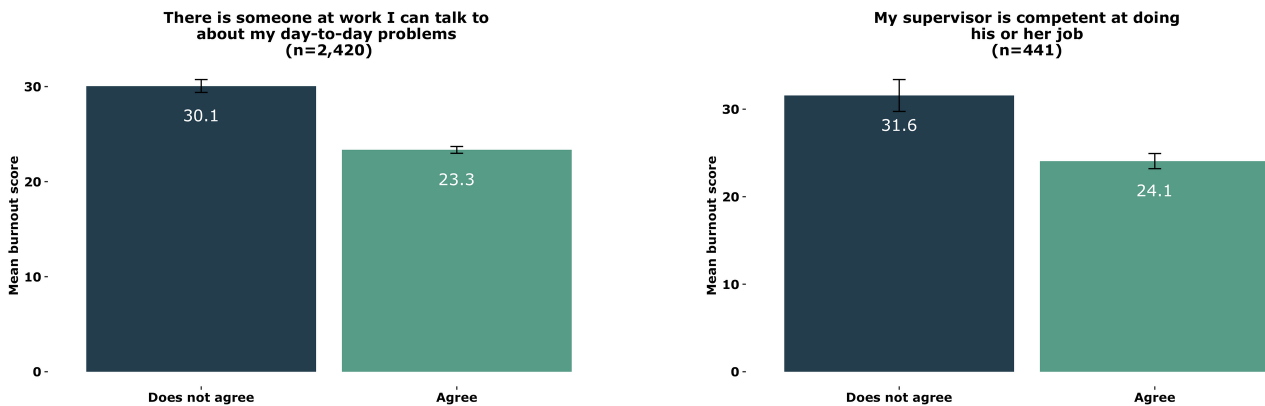
Our results shed light on the precarity of government workers' mental health during the Covid-19 outbreak. We found that 1 in 3 public servants are burnt out, 1 in 4 are experiencing moderate to severe anxiety, and 1 in 5 are experiencing compassion fatigue. 35% of government workers have also faced increased job demands, and these workers reported higher levels of anxiety.

Our results demonstrate that government workers' perceptions of their clients and their ability to make an impact in government shape mental health outcomes. Public servants who feel that government is the right place to make a difference in society have a 19 percentage-point lower likelihood of experiencing burnout compared to those who are less certain of their ability to make a difference within government. We also find striking variation in how public servants view the people they are serving. Government workers who attribute poverty to systemic rather than individual factors face a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing compassion fatigue and burnout during this crisis.





Our results also shed light on the important role coworkers and supervisors play when it comes to anxiety and burnout. Public servants who feel like they can turn to a peer at work have a 16.6 percentage-point lower likelihood of experiencing burnout compared to those who feel unsupported in their jobs. The same is true about supervisors -- if government workers do not believe that their supervisors care about them, they are 28.8 percentage points more likely to be experiencing burnout. Relatedly, those who are confident in the competence of their coworkers have a 17 percentage point lower likelihood of experiencing anxiety and a 19.5 percentage-point lower likelihood of experiencing burnout compared to those who may not trust their coworkers to get things done correctly. Perceptions of supervisors' competence matters here too, as government workers who believe their supervisors are competent are 16.1 percentage-points less likely to to experience burnout compared to those who are less sure of their supervisor's competence.



## Next steps

Our study has important implications not only for the Covid-19 pandemic, but also in thinking about future health-related crises, natural disasters, and other emergencies governments will be called to respond to. This research suggests that alarming rates of workplace-related psychological distress associated with the Covid-19 outbreak are widespread among public sector workers. Even following the pandemic, policymakers will need to invest significant resources to address the mental health of the government workforce, in addition to well-known sectors in healthcare and essential services. Further research can explore how stressors at home impact psychological distress at work, especially for those public servants who have transitioned to telework.



The People Lab is currently working with multiple government partners to design and test interventions aimed at reducing burnout among public sector workers.

## Additional resources

View media coverage:

- [A Burnout Crisis Hits Government](#)
- [Public Service in the US: Increasingly Thankless, Exhausting](#)

Read more about our work:

- [Project page](#)

Related research on burnout:

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

## 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.