

# Emergency management, mental health and job retention

Patel SS, Guevara K, Hollar TL, DeVito RA, Erickson TB. [Surveying mental health stressors of emergency management professionals: Factors in recruiting and retaining emergency managers in an era of disasters and pandemics](#). *J Emerg Manag*. 2023 Sep-Oct;21(5):375-384. doi: 10.5055/jem.0820. PMID: 37932942.

## Introduction

*The issue:* Emergency management is a profession that is, as for frontline workers, characterised by stress and burnout. Providing leadership across 24/7 shifts, the increasing technical and operational complexity of work, and the intensification of disasters is a recipe for high stress environments.

*Reasons for study:* The American study that is the focus of this knowledge digest responded to a lack of data about EM mental health, compared to frontline workers, and anecdotal evidence that even before the COVID 19 pandemic there was rising fatigue and burnout among emergency managers (EMs), complicating recruitment and retention efforts.

*Purpose of study was to:*

- establish baseline mental health data for Ems
- explore factors that contributed to a desire to leave the job Contributing factors studied were a) stress levels, b) organisational culture, c) age, b) education, c) years in the job, d) number of disasters managed.
- consider how the finding can inform strategies for resilience and retention.

## Methods

*Sample:*

- 903 emergency management professionals recruited via convenience sampling from a database of approximately 22,000 contacts.
- EMs were from the USA. 46% were female, 54% male, predominantly over 46 years old (57%), and mostly Caucasian (85%). Most had managed at least one major disaster (59%) and held their primary position for over six years (64%).

*Tools for data collection:* an online cross-sectional survey which incorporated:

- The Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS) to determine scores related to symptoms from indirect trauma exposure.
- The Emergency Reaction Questionnaire (ERQ) to evaluate personality traits related to "fight or flight" responses.
- A novel seven-question organizational culture (OC) scale was also developed to measure workplace environment impacts.

*Time of data collection:* between October 2021 and March 2022



*Data analysis:* principal component analysis, bivariate tests, and logistic regression to identify factors associated with wanting to leave the job.

*Limitations:* Bias from reliance on self-reported data and convenience sampling, national bias (U.S.-based Ems) and limited generalizability. The novel organizational culture scale requires further validation

## High level Findings

Findings about the odds of wanting to leave the job based on the following factors are as follows:

- *Secondary traumatic stress (STS):* Those with high STS have nearly three times higher odds of leaving
- *Poor organizational culture:* Nearly 3 times higher odds of leaving.
- *Age:* EMS in the age range 18-35 are more likely to leave.
- *Less than 1 year in position:* Less experienced Ems more likely to leave.
- *Education:* Completion of higher education is associated with increased likelihood of wanting to leave the job, and the odds are highest for those with postgraduate qualifications.
- *Number of disasters managed:* if an EM had managed 3-5 disasters there was twice the odds of them wanting to leave compared to and EM that have never managed a disaster.

Other general findings were:

- Half of the respondents felt undercompensated for the levels of job stress they experience.
- 52% described their jobs as 'too political'.
- Consideration of job change rose from 43% pre-pandemic to 64% during the pandemic.
- 46% of those contemplating leaving considering a complete career change.

## Discussion

The study found that over half of EMs experience mild to severe secondary traumatic stress, with nearly one-third suffering moderate to severe symptoms. Untreated stress nearly triples the risk of leaving the field and this is not to mention the risks associated with impaired leadership and decision-making.

Notably, 61% reported lacking access to mental health services. Poor organizational culture significantly influences attrition, with 83% of those considering leaving citing it as a primary cause. Half of respondents felt inadequately compensated for job stress and with greater the levels of education, the more likely EMs are to leave the job.

Workplace politics and poor leadership further exacerbate stress and turnover intentions and so does levels of frontline leadership experience. EMs managing three to five disasters are more likely to consider leaving, while those with more experience show less attrition.



These insights highlight the importance of leadership development, mental health support, and organisational reforms to retain a skilled workforce capable of responding to increasingly complex disasters.

## Future Directions

The study suggests that future research in this area could incorporate international samples, objective mental health assessments, and examine EMs with prior trauma exposure. Applying theoretical frameworks and experimental designs could also deepen understanding and inform targeted interventions.

The research highlights an urgent need for positive organizational culture and enhancing support systems. While pay concerns are a separate issue, a positive organizational culture and empathetic leadership can mitigate job turnover problems among emergency managers.

## Conclusion

The study shows that emergency managers face multiple challenges that lead to secondary traumatic stress and if left untreated, and in interaction with other factors, are more likely to leave their job. Maintaining a resilient and effective cadre of emergency managers workforce is critical for ensuring emergency management can meet future challenges.