



MONITOR & MITIGATE

The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Safety

Updates: Morale and Mental Health

First Responder Morale: What's Happening in Your Department

The job of a first responder is challenging on its own. The addition of a highly contagious and deadly disease changing the responsibilities and nature of the job adds an entirely new level of strain.

Administrative staff of emergency response organizations reported the following morale and mental health impacts:

- Infection among personnel
- Fear of exposing loved ones to COVID-19
- New policies and procedures for service delivery
- Isolation from coworkers and the community
- Reduced training
- Not looking forward to coming to work
- Loneliness from isolation
- Reduced motivation and productivity
- Fatigue and burnout
- Increase in early retirements during the pandemic

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has continued to impact first responders. Both frontline responders and administrative staff have reported their struggle with diminished morale for a multitude of reasons. While those on the frontline and administrative staff have stated COVID-19's impact on morale and mental health, the conversation around these topics differs by employee type.

“ Oh absolutely [burnout is a problem]. I think [administrative staff] did a poor job of recognizing what kind of stress the firefighters were under specifically.

(INT. 3693)



Resource Referrals

For project news and updates:

- Visit start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders & second sight-ts.com/covid19-topic-dashboard
- Subscribe to START's newsletter at start.umd.edu/newsletters
- Follow us on social media with #COVIDFirstResponders

IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ The impact of COVID-19 on first responders' morale and mental health
- ▶ Fatigue and burnout among frontline responders.
- ▶ How to address morale issues.

RELEVANT FOR



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The goal of the project is to measure the impact of COVID-19 on first responders, identify and share best practices organizations can put in place to protect themselves in the short term, and identify strategies to make first responder organizations more resilient to pandemics in the future.

This brief is based on findings from interviews with 25 first responders representing 25 departments across approximately 16 states.

Fatigue and Burnout

It is clear that as the pandemic endures, the biggest morale impact has been the burnout that frontline responders feel. One respondent expressed a sentiment echoed by many frontline responders: “burnout [is] an issue, but I wouldn’t say career burnout. I would say fatigue... we had guys who would be at work for 10 to 15 days without a break” (INT. 3932). Frontline responders are feeling the weight of the almost two-year long pandemic, long hours, and the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19. Personnel “were getting COVID and calling out and that, of course, placed more burden on the folks that still were at work, which... got them to burnout faster” (INT. 4156). As more people were calling out, others were having to work overtime, and the burnout became “just exhaustion burnout from too many picking up the slack for all the people that weren’t coming around” (INT. 1779). Many first responders are experiencing chronic fatigue and exhaustion that has been exacerbated by the endless pandemic and heightened risk level of the virus.

Existing Morale and Mental Health Issues

- The uncertainties surrounding COVID-19: First responders are continuously “wondering...what happens if I get sick? Who’s going to take care of me?” (INT. 5762).
- Exposing loved ones: Personnel are “still in people’s homes with unknown exposure. And so when I get home I strip my shoes off and spray Lysol on them and...make sure I wash up well so I’m not tracking anything into our home” (INT. 5116).
- Fear of COVID-19: With the deadly virus, “there is just such a hesitancy” when responding to calls (INT. 3602).

How to Address Morale Among Frontline Responders

- 1 Provide resources for mental health support such as counselors or local hotlines in person or virtually.
- 2 Allow personnel to voice their mental health needs through an anonymous suggestion box or surveys.
- 3 If possible, provide hazard pay for first responders who are working overtime.



HOW TO HELP FIRST RESPONDERS

CONTACT

START >>>

Amy Pate
infostart@umd.edu
www.start.umd.edu



Nathan Meehan
info@second sight-ts.com
www.second sight-ts.com

start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders
second sight-ts.com/covid19-topic-dashboard

AUTHOR

Madeline Romm (START)

This project is funded by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Social Science Technology Center as Task 2 of “Advance Situational Awareness Capabilities in Support of Targeted Violent and Threat Prevention in the United States” (award #7ORSAT20FR0000082). The views and conclusions contained in the document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the University of Maryland, or START.