

MONITOR & MITIGATE

The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Safety

The Preparedness of Frontline Responders During COVID-19

COVID-19 presents innumerable challenges to first responders. Preparedness impacts the ability of frontline responders to effectively and safely support their communities. Preparedness relates to the ongoing cycle of organizing, training, equipping, and exercising to ensure an effective response to crises. However, several respondents felt their agencies were not prepared to face the conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the words of a participant who worked for both police and fire organizations, “It was as if neither organization could anticipate correctly how to deal with what was clearly going to be a major, major problem for the world.” (INT. 7369)

Factors Supporting or Undermining Feelings of Preparedness

During interviews, respondents reported factors both supporting and undermining their own feelings of preparedness. Primary factors reported as undermining preparedness included:

- Personnel shortages resulting from quarantines and infections (INT. 2395, INT. 3932).
- Not enough resources to address issues such as burnout and morale (INT. 3693, INT. 4300).
- Lack of Information about COVID-19 and appropriate safety protocols (INT. 4300, INT. 5116, INT. 3602).
- Shortage of proper equipment, such as N95 masks, safety glasses, gowns, and disinfectants.

“*And then, of course, everyone started to run out. And then it was almost guerrilla warfare of how are we going to make this last longer? How are we going to adapt? What can we get away with?* (INT. 4156)



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

- ▶ Preparedness
- ▶ Factors Supporting or Undermining Feelings of Preparedness
- ▶ Resources to Improve Preparedness

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 15 police, fire, and EMS personnel working in rural, urban, and suburban organizations around the U.S.

Respondents reported multiple factors that bolstered their feelings of preparedness:

- Personal experiences with previous crises such as AIDS, SARS, influenza, and Ebola (INT. 1403, INT. 7639).
- Established fit testing policies made frontline responders feel more comfortable using PPE (INT. 3693).
- Emergency plans developed during previous crises (INT. 8985).
- Professional and personal relationships with community members educated or trained in infectious disease and emergency management (INT. 1403, INT. 2395).
- Relationships with local hospitals and hospital workers facilitated sharing of information on COVID-19, vaccines, safety practices, and access to PPE (INT. 5548, INT. 4156).

Notably, respondents tended to focus on institutional deficiencies when reporting on factors that undermined feelings of preparedness. In comparison, they referenced their own individual experiences, personal relationships, and institutional practices when reporting factors that supported feelings of preparedness. Findings highlight the importance of leaning into the preparedness cycle and also leveraging the experiences of agency staff to assist in drawing out lessons for the entire agency.

Preparation impacts the ability of frontline responders to effectively and safely support their communities. Opportunities to better prepare first responders for future crises include the facilitation of information sharing between responder agencies and local health systems, increased equipment access, and predetermined emergency plans.

“ For me, it was no adjustment whatsoever, because, like I said, I was a paramedic when AIDS started and we had to do the same thing. (INT. 1403)

Resources to Increase Preparedness

- ▶ Information for First Responders on Maintaining Operational Capabilities During a Pandemic ([fema.gov](https://www.fema.gov))
 - ▶ COVID-19 Information and Resources for Emergency Responders - National Volunteer Fire Council ([nvfc.org](https://www.nvfc.org))
 - ▶ Emergency Preparedness and Response | Occupational Safety and Health Administration ([osha.gov](https://www.osha.gov))
 - ▶ Visit our [Covid-19 Topic Dashboard](#) for further insight into how the first responder community can be supported in the future.



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

AUTHORS

- Tori Fox–St. Jacques, MPH, Research Analyst II, SSTS
- Nathan Meehan, Ph.D., Director of Research and Development, SSTS

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 #70RSAT20FR0000082). 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, Second Sight Training Systems, or START.