

## Foreword



Each day in Australia, our police and emergency service personnel – paid and volunteer – answer the call and put themselves on the line to protect and help us. Physically, mentally and emotionally, their jobs demand so much. Their families and friends bear witness to this. Many have retired too early from the jobs they loved.

This report of Beyond Blue's national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of police and emergency services, *Answering the call*, reflects the voices and experiences of 21,014 serving and former employees and volunteers from 33 police, fire, ambulance and state emergency services agencies. This response rate signals that mental health and wellbeing are not only important, but top of mind.

People were asked about their experience of mental health conditions and their thoughts of suicide; their experience of stigma; their use of support services and programs; individual and organisational risk and protective factors; and attitudinal and behavioural factors.

The report confirms many things we already know but also shines a light on some new insights.

And perhaps the greatest significance of this report is simply its scale. Through it we have a detailed, national picture of the mental health and wellbeing issues affecting those who serve and protect.

It provides the data needed to make sure agencies make the right changes. It creates, for the first time, baseline prevalence and other data against which progress and outcomes can be measured.

One headline illustrates that the positive action already underway by agencies and representative bodies must continue and it must be sustained.

While many employees and volunteers reported having good mental health and wellbeing and high levels of resilience, *Answering the call* also reports that respondents have higher rates of psychological distress, higher rates of diagnosis of mental health conditions, and higher rates of suicidal thinking and planning than the general adult population in Australia.

Three things stand out.

First, a supportive work culture is like giving everyone in the organisation a mental health inoculation.

Workplaces that are supportive and inclusive, have regular discussions about occupational experiences, and effectively manage emotional demands on staff have lower rates of PTSD and psychological distress. In fact, poor workplace practices and culture are equally debilitating for emergency service personnel as exposure to trauma.

Second, many people with psychometric results indicating they are experiencing high or very high distress – and probable PTSD – did not recognise that they had a mental health issue.

This is a major concern and suggests that a significant number of police and emergency services personnel still have poor mental health literacy. They are not recognising the signs and symptoms of anxiety, depression or PTSD in themselves. To be blunt, they know mental health is important, but do not realise they may be struggling or unwell.

Third, self-stigma appears to be alive and well. However, individuals have a positive regard for – and are supportive of – colleagues experiencing mental health conditions.

Self-stigma – a fear of what others may think or an inability to talk openly about personal feelings and circumstances – gets in the way of people seeking support and is associated with poorer mental health outcomes. But let's think about what this means. It is indicating a disparity between the way people feel about their colleagues and how they see themselves. This says a great deal about the camaraderie that exists in police and emergency services.

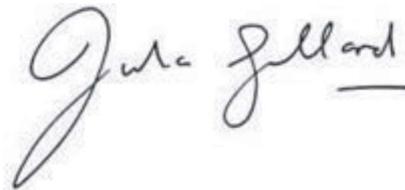
*Answering the call* provides us all with an unprecedented national picture. Beyond Blue remains committed to support the sector to further develop strategies and actions that reduce the mental health risks to police and emergency service personnel.

I thank everyone who completed the survey, those agencies, organisations and individuals who promoted it and supported Beyond Blue along the way.

Creating a mentally healthy workplace requires authentic commitment and sustained effort and resourcing. It requires valuing mental health equally with physical health and occupational and public safety.

But the effort is worth it because, mentally healthy workplaces keep everyone safer.

The Hon Julia Gillard, AC

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia Gillard". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line at the end.

Chair  
Beyond Blue