

REDUCING BURNOUT & RESIGNATIONS AMONG 911 DISPATCHERS

Elizabeth Linos, Krista Ruffini, Laura Schwartz,
and Stephanie Wilcoxon
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The People Lab



HARVARD Kennedy School

In collaboration with the Behavioral Insights Team and nine U.S. cities, we conducted a randomized experiment to test the impact of a low-cost program aimed at increasing social support and reducing burnout and resignations among 911 dispatchers. In a six-week online program, dispatchers were prompted to share advice anonymously and asynchronously with their peers in other cities. We then measured the effect on burnout and turnover for four months after the end of the program.

CONTEXT

There is a growing human capital crisis in the US government workforce. More than a third of frontline workers, such as teachers, social workers, and nurses, report high burnout – characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low feelings of personal accomplishment. Burnout has been linked to a wide range of negative individual and organizational outcomes including sleep problems, heart disease, decreased job performance and commitment, absenteeism, and turnover. Indeed, in some sectors, nearly half of frontline workers resign in their first few years on the job, causing serious staff shortages. This dual challenge of high burnout and high turnover raises concerns not only about employee well-being but also about the ability of government to effectively deliver services. While these challenges have been well documented, there are many unanswered questions about what causes burnout and limited evidence on strategies that reduce it, especially in the public sector.

911 dispatchers are at particularly high risk of burnout because they work long hours with limited breaks and have to make life-or-death decisions in minutes for hundreds of callers each day. Dispatchers face much of the same trauma as emergency responders or law enforcement officers but do not get as much formal support, benefits, or recognition for their work. Yet their decisions are critical to understanding broader public safety challenges in the U.S., making this an important population to study.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 A low-cost six-week program that prompted 911 dispatchers to anonymously share advice with one another significantly reduced burnout and resignations four months after the end of the program.
- 2 The asynchronous program significantly increased perceived social support and affirmed social belonging, which may be one channel through which it affected burnout and resignations.
- 3 If this program were implemented at scale in a midsize city with 100 dispatchers, it could save at least \$400,000 in training and recruitment costs.

RESEARCH

From September 2017 to March 2018, we collaborated with the Behavioral Insights Team and nine U.S. cities to conduct a randomized controlled trial (RCT) testing the impact of a low-cost social support intervention aimed at reducing burnout. We hypothesized that increasing perceived social support – the belief that a person would have others at work to turn to should they need it – would causally affect burnout and turnover.

In this study, we co-designed a six-week program aimed at strengthening 911 dispatchers' sense of social support and belonging. We randomly assigned 536 dispatchers across the nine participating cities to one of two groups: a treatment group or a control group. Each week for six weeks, a supervisor or department leader in each city sent an email to dispatchers who were assigned to the treatment group. The emails were identical in all cities and included two parts: a story from another dispatcher and a prompt that encouraged workers to reflect on and share a positive professional experience that their peers might be able to relate to. The emails aimed to increase perceived social support by framing the exercise as an opportunity to share advice and reflect on how one's experiences could support one's peers.

Dispatchers who were assigned to the control group received a simplified version of the email in week one, but did not receive any additional emails.

To evaluate the impact of the program, we measured burnout via a survey administered to all dispatchers prior to launching the program (at baseline), immediately following the six-week program, and four months after the program ended. Participation was voluntary and the response rate was approximately 28% in both follow-up surveys. To measure burnout, we used the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, a validated scale that includes 19 questions in three categories: personal, work-, and client-related burnout. We also measured sick leave and turnover using administrative data from each participating city.

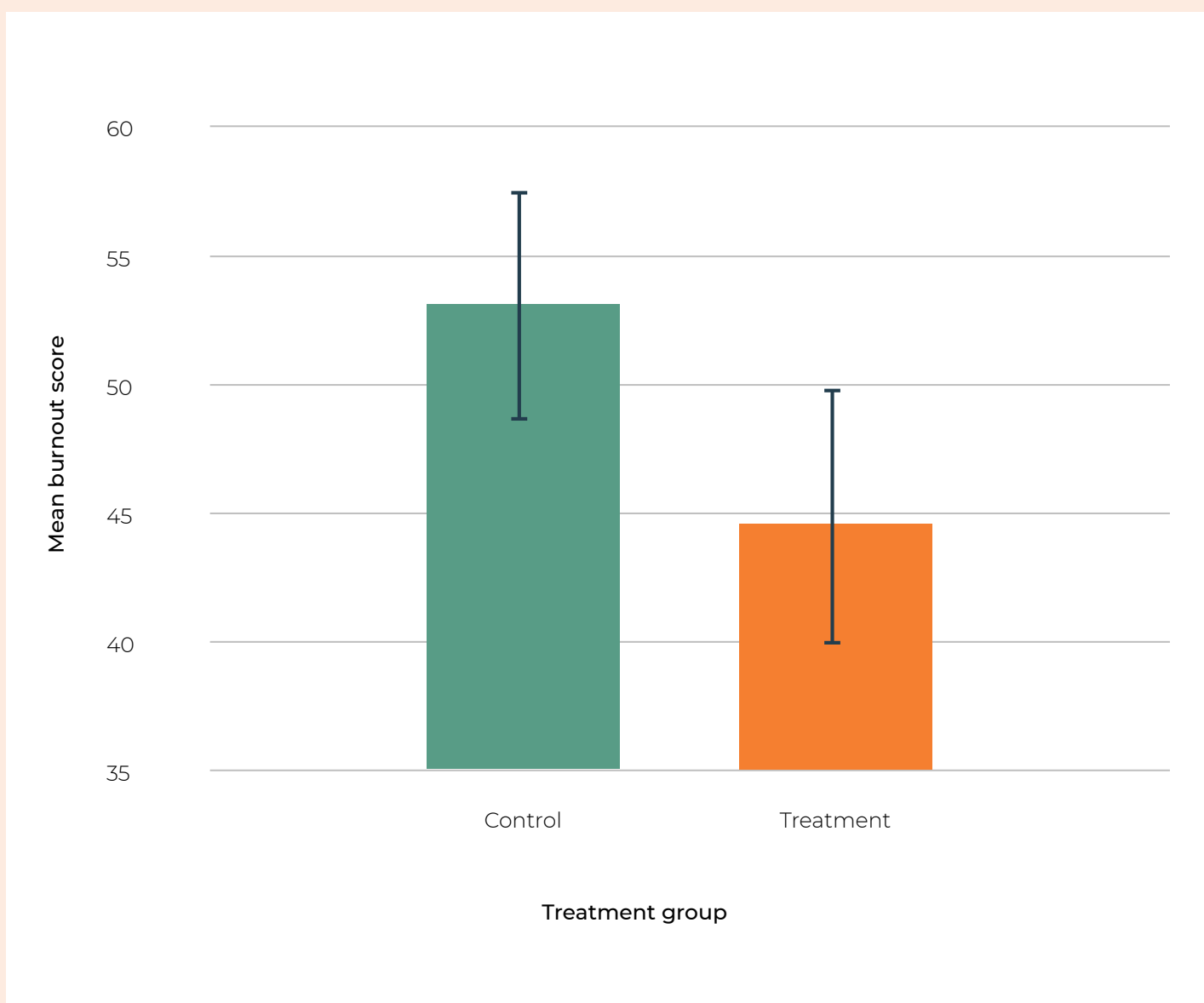
In order to understand the findings from the field experiment, we also conducted a follow-up online experiment to directly test whether the intervention affected social support. With a sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (n=497), we conceptually replicated one of the weekly prompts from the field experiment. Participants were randomly assigned either to give advice to a new colleague at their job and describe how people at their job support each other (treatment group) or to give advice to a teenager starting school (control group). The control group prompt was chosen to retain the advice-giving component of the treatment but to eliminate the social belonging and peer component. We then measured differences in perceived social support and social belonging between participants in the two groups.

WHAT WE FOUND

We find that dispatchers in the treatment group – those who received the social support intervention – reported significantly lower levels of burnout than those in the control group four months after the end of the program. The intervention significantly reduced burnout in each of the three categories (personal, work-, and client-related burnout), as well as overall composite burnout. Overall, burnout fell by eight points among dispatchers in the treatment group relative to dispatchers in the control group (see Figure 1). This magnitude is both statistically significant and meaningful: it is about the same as the difference in burnout scores between social workers and administrative staff in a hospital setting.

FIGURE 1

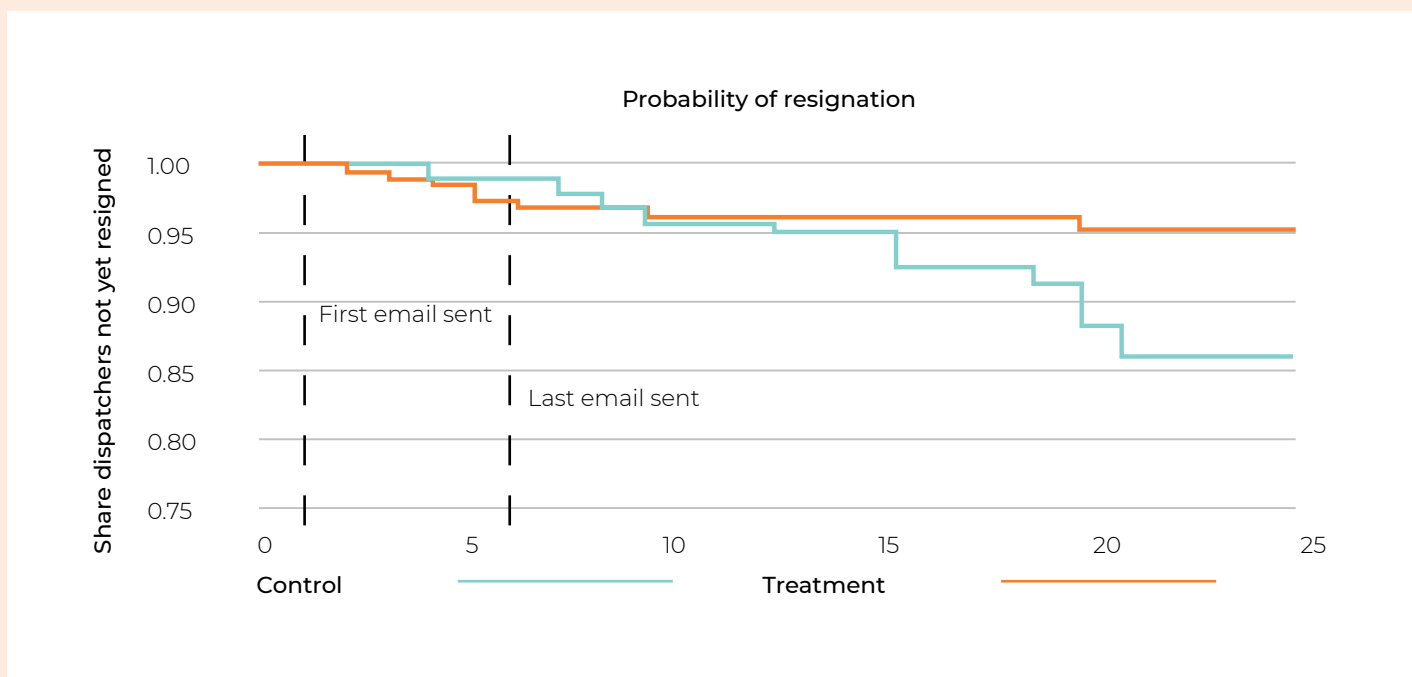
Reported burnout among 911 dispatchers in the treatment and control groups, four months after the end of the program



WHAT WE FOUND (cont.)

We also find that the intervention significantly reduced resignations by more than 50% over the four months. Although dispatchers in the treatment group were more likely to resign in the first few weeks of the program, their resignation rate leveled off thereafter. Meanwhile, resignations increased steadily for those in the control group. After four months, we see significantly higher turnover for dispatchers in the control group than the treatment group.

FIGURE 2
Resignations among 911 dispatchers in the treatment and control groups, by week



Overall, dispatchers had positive feedback about the intervention. In the endline survey, about two-thirds of dispatchers reported that they wished to continue receiving weekly emails, with many noting that the shared stories resonated with their personal experiences.

MECHANISMS

In a follow-up online experiment, we explored whether the findings from the field experiment were driven by an increase in perceived social support or by some other mechanism. We find that online survey participants who were assigned to receive a prompt that mirrored those used in the field experiment reported significantly higher levels of social belonging and perceived social support on all dimensions than participants who were assigned to receive a control prompt. Specifically, asking participants to give advice to a new colleague increased perceived social support and social belonging by 0.27 standard deviations relative to the control. This suggests that the intervention does increase perceived social support and affirms belonging.

WHAT'S NEXT

In a large-scale field experiment across nine U.S. cities, we tested the impact of a six-week online program aimed at affirming social belonging and ultimately reducing burnout among 911 dispatchers. Our project demonstrates that even low-cost tweaks to work environments can have meaningful impacts on frontline worker burnout. Not only can strengthening social belonging and social support help frontline workers, it can also be a very cost-effective strategy to improve retention for agencies. Future research should explore whether social support interventions are effective in other contexts, especially those where perceived social support is already high, as well as the importance of active versus passive participation in such interventions. Additionally, research should test other methods of increasing social support across policy contexts and the downstream impact of reducing burnout in frontline workers on performance and service delivery.

SOURCES

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About The People Lab

The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies for solving urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce; improving resident–government interactions; and reimagining the production and use of evidence.



Contact Us

✉ peoplelab@hks.harvard.edu

🐦 @HKS_PeopleLab