WHEN PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SERVICE HARM THE PUBLIC SERVANT
Predictors of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Government

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The status of public servants' mental health can impact how, how well, and to whom services are delivered. In collaboration with a mid-sized U.S. city and a state government agency, we conducted a large survey among 3,341 public servants during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this paper, we first document the levels of psychological distress public servants experienced during this time, focusing specifically on burnout and compassion fatigue. Second, we explore the conditions under which public servants were likely to be at risk of higher psychological distress during this period of crisis.

CONTEXT

Many public sector employees face psychological burdens related to burnout and compassion fatigue. Burnout is a psychological syndrome that emerges in response to chronic workplace stress. People experiencing burnout may feel exhausted and detached from their work, and may experience reduced productivity.[1] Compassion fatigue refers to a set of negative psychological symptoms that caregivers experience following exposure to primary or secondary trauma as a result of providing services.[2] Both burnout and compassion fatigue are associated with significant health challenges and high rates of absenteeism and turnover.[3,4] Compassion fatigue and burnout have also been shown to affect public servants' job performance and their ability to deliver quality services. For instance, burnout has been associated with more medical mistakes and accidents on the job, as well as poorer client satisfaction.[5,6]

In 2020, as governments adjusted their operations to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, some public servants saw job demands increase and caseloads skyrocket, while others had to quickly adapt to shifting responsibilities, deployment into new roles, and new remote work environments, all while continuing to deliver high quality public services.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 In a large survey of public servants conducted at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, one in three were found to be experiencing burnout, and one in five were found to be experiencing compassion fatigue.

2 Higher public service motivation—the belief that government is the right place for public service—and higher perceived social support at work are both associated with lower levels of psychological distress.

3 Attributing poverty to systemic causes (e.g., lack of opportunities) as opposed to individual factors (e.g., laziness) is associated with higher levels of psychological distress.

Research has shown that high job demands—parts of a job that require sustained physical or psychological effort—can increase the risk of burnout and exhaustion.[7] Job demands can also increase when job responsibilities change rapidly. At the same time, other research suggests that social support at work can serve as a buffer against burnout and compassion fatigue.[8,9] As such, we hypothesized that:

1 Public servants whose job responsibilities changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as those who served on the front lines, would report higher levels of burnout and compassion fatigue than those whose responsibilities did not change and those who did not serve on the front lines.

2 Public servants who perceived more social support in the workplace would report lower levels of burnout and compassion fatigue than those who perceived less social support.

RESEARCH

In April and May of 2020, we collaborated with a mid-sized U.S. city and a state unemployment agency to survey 3,341 public sector employees across 45 departments. All full-time employees in the collaborating city government and state agency were invited to participate. Some survey questions were directed only to the state agency employees. Responding to the survey as a whole and to any specific question was voluntary.

Our main outcomes were two measures of psychological distress: compassion fatigue and burnout. To measure these, we used the Compassion Fatigue Short Scale[10] which includes subscales for compassion fatigue and burnout. Additionally, we included questions to measure the following:

- **Job demands:** We (a) directly asked respondents if their work responsibilities had changed, and (b) constructed a measure to gauge "frontline worker" status, which we defined as respondents who were in non-supervisory roles and were therefore more likely to interact with beneficiaries.

- **Perceived social support:** We measured agreement with two statements: "There is someone at work I can talk to about my day-to-day problems if I need to" and "My direct supervisor shows very little interest in the feelings of subordinates."

- **Perceptions of respondents' own roles in government:** We measured agreement with three statements: "Meaningful public service is very important to me," "When something bad happens, I feel that maybe I don't belong in public service," and "Government is the best place for those who want to do public service."

- **Perceptions of coworkers and supervisors:** We measured agreement with two statements: "My direct supervisor is competent at doing his or her job" and "There is a commitment to professionalism at all levels of this organization."

- **Poverty attributions:** We measured respondents' beliefs about why people are poor on a scale from 1 to 10, in which 1 implies that they are poor due to laziness and lack of willpower and 10 that they are poor due to an unfair society.

We then created three mean indices of perceptions of one's own role as a public servant, perceptions of peers and supervisors, and perceptions of beneficiaries.

WHAT WE FOUND

44% of the city sample and 46% of the state agency sample responded to at least one question in the online surveys.

Respondents exhibited significant levels of psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. One in three public servants who responded to the survey reported high burnout, and one in five were experiencing compassion fatigue.

Respondents who reported an increase in job demands were six percentage points more likely to experience compassion fatigue and ten percentage points more likely to experience burnout than those who did not report an increase in job demands—a finding in line with our first hypothesis. Overall, 35% of survey respondents reported increased job demands due to the pandemic.

Respondents who perceived greater social support at work reported lower levels of compassion fatigue and burnout—a finding in line with our second hypothesis (see Figure 1). Respondents who believed that they had a peer at work they could turn to in difficult times were 16 percentage points less likely to report experiencing burnout than those who felt less supported at work, and 7 percentage points less likely to report experiencing compassion fatigue. Relatedly, respondents who did not feel supported by their supervisors were 26 percentage points more likely to report burnout and 14 percentage points more likely to report compassion fatigue than those who felt supported by their supervisors.

FIGURE 1
Relationship between burnout, compassion fatigue, and perceived social support at work
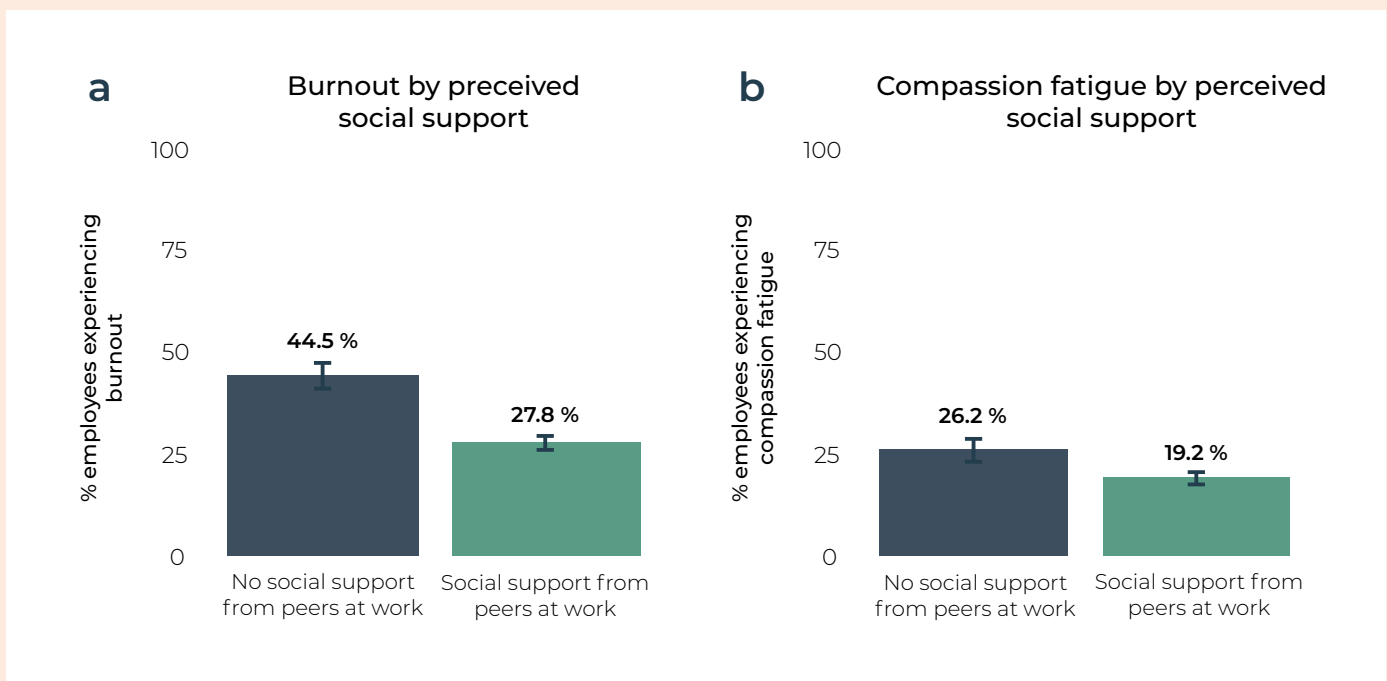
Notes: (a) shows the proportion of respondents who reported burnout by agreement with the statement "There is someone at work I can talk to about my day-to-day problems if I need to" (N=2,350); (b) shows the proportion of respondents who reported compassion fatigue by agreement with the statement "There is someone at work I can talk to about my day-to-day problems if I need to" (N=2,227). Bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

**Public service motivation was negatively associated with psychological distress** (see Figure 2). Respondents who viewed government as the best place for public service were 19 percentage points less likely to report experiencing burnout and 15 percentage points less likely to report experiencing compassion fatigue than respondents who did not agree that government is the best place for public service.

Respondents' perceptions of beneficiaries were significantly correlated with psychological distress. Respondents who attributed poverty to systemic rather than individual factors were, on average, 3 percentage points more likely to report experiencing compassion fatigue and 6 percentage points more likely to report experiencing burnout.

FIGURE 2
Relationship between burnout, compassion fatigue, and beliefs about public service

a Burnout by beliefs about public service

b Compassion fatigue by beliefs about public service
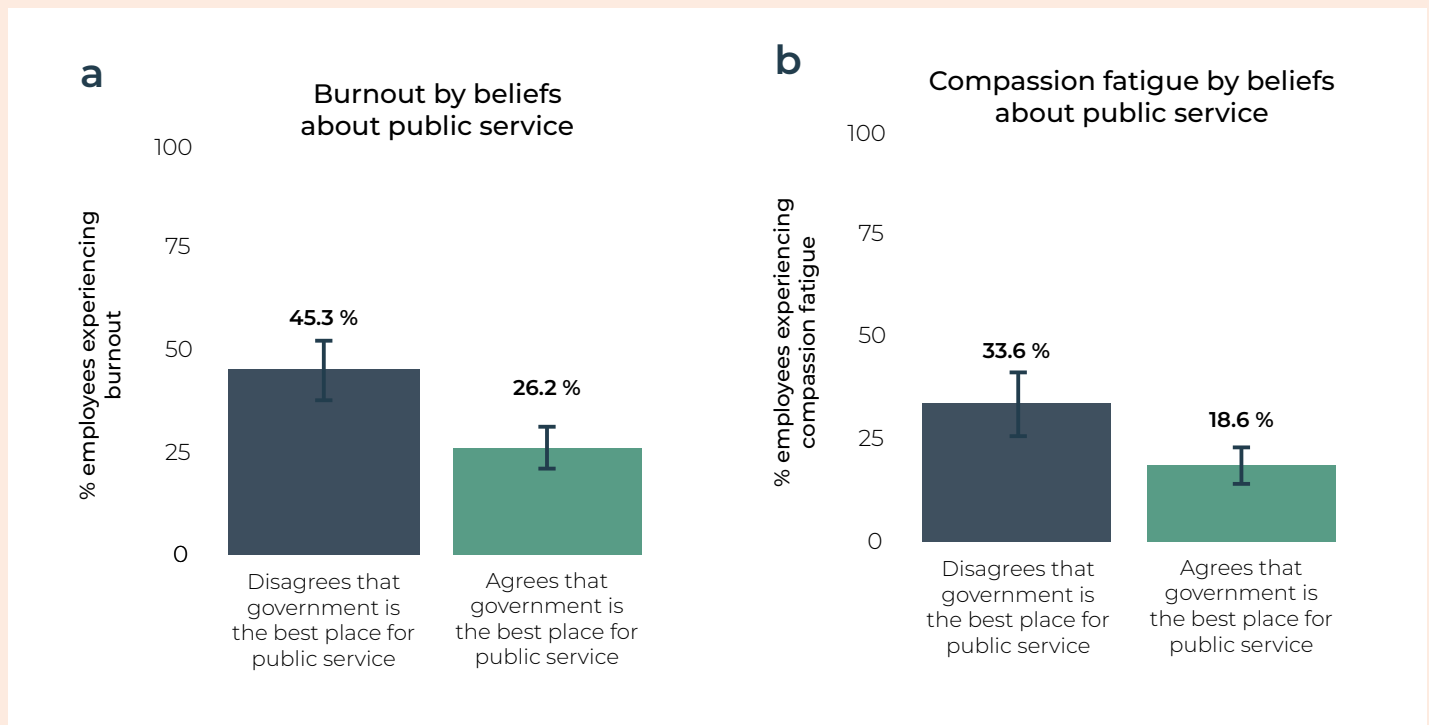
Notes: (a) shows the proportion of respondents who reported experiencing burnout by agreement with the statement "Government is the best place for those who want to do public service" (N=380); (b) shows the proportion of respondents who reported compassion fatigue by agreement with the statement "Government is the best place for those who want to do public service" (N=337). Bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

WHAT'S NEXT

In a survey of 3,341 public sector workers conducted during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found staggeringly high rates of psychological distress: one in every three employees reported feeling burnt out, while one in five were experiencing compassion fatigue. Notably, respondents who viewed government as the right place for public service and those who perceived higher levels of workplace social support were less likely to report experiencing distress. This finding underscores the need for additional research in this area. In particular, future research should explore the causal relationship between psychological distress, workplace demands, and social support. The People Lab is exploring opportunities to test methods of increasing social support in the workplace, with the aim of reducing burnout and psychological distress.

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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.

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