

DUMP  
operator



CENTRE FOR  
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Curtin University

FUTURE OF WORK INSTITUTE



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN  
AUSTRALIA

# Summary of Findings

## FIFO Worker Mental Health and Wellbeing: The impact of Covid-19

Research and Key Messages

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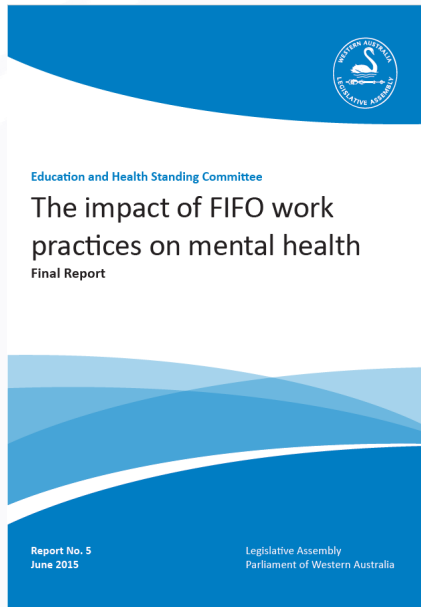
[www.transformativeworkdesign.com/fifo-mental-health-survey](http://www.transformativeworkdesign.com/fifo-mental-health-survey)



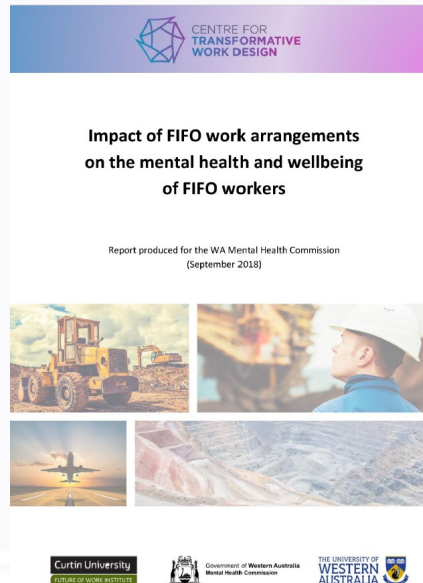
# FIFO work then and now

Research into FIFO worker mental health became a key focus with the 2015 government inquiry into the issue. In 2018, the Centre for Transformative Work design completed a comprehensive study into FIFO worker mental health that looked at FIFO work from many angles. In 2020, the impact of COVID-19 meant necessary changes were required to protect workers and retain viability of operations. The present study focused on understanding the impact of these changes, provide a snapshot of FIFO workers' experiences during COVID-19, and measure mental health and wellbeing.

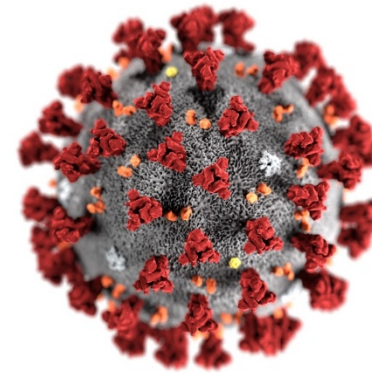
2015



2018

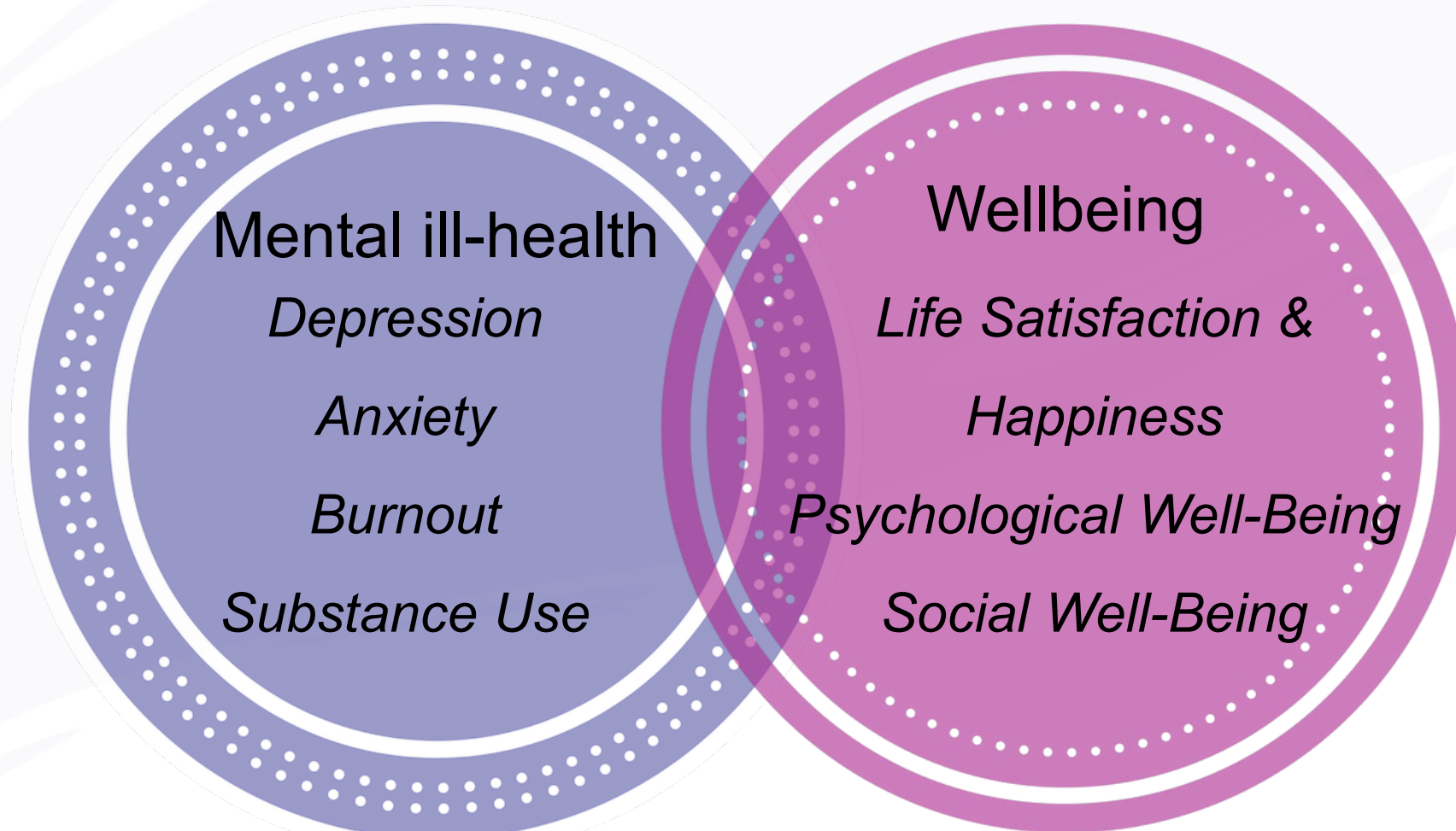


2020

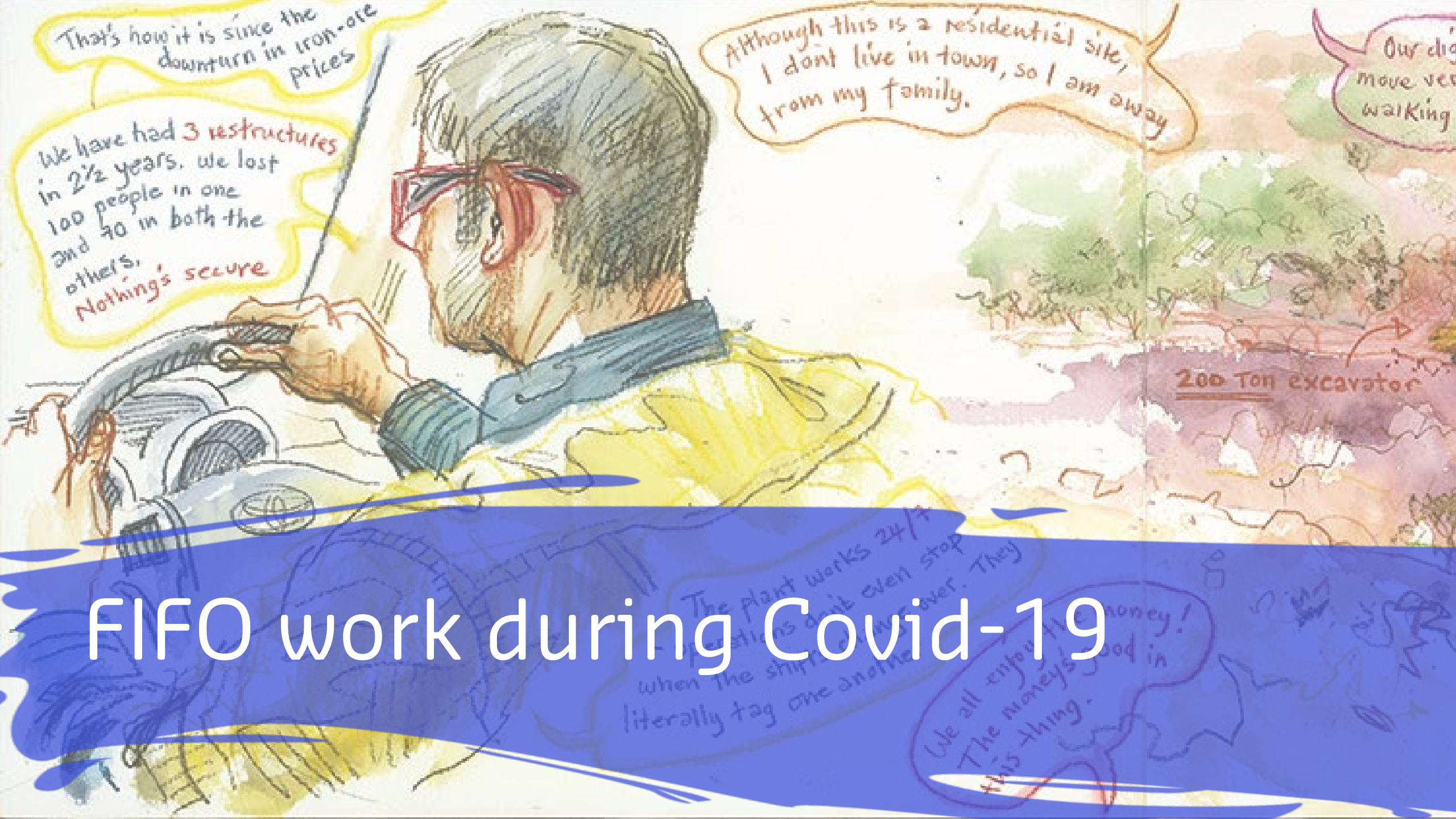


# What is Mental Health?

Mental health is more than the absence of mental ill-health. When considering mental health, the focus is often on preventing or treating mental ill-health, rather than boosting positive mental health. For someone to be considered mentally healthy, there must be positive wellbeing experiences present.







That's how it is since the downturn in iron-ore prices

We have had 3 restructures in 2½ years. We lost 100 people in one and 70 in both the others.  
*Nothing's secure*

Although this is a residential site, I don't live in town, so I am away from my family.

Our dig move very walking

200 Ton excavator

FIFO work during Covid-19

The plant works 24/7 - operations don't even stop when the shift changes over. They literally tag one another over. They

We all enjoy the money! The money's good in this thing.

# Why look into FIFO worker mental health now?

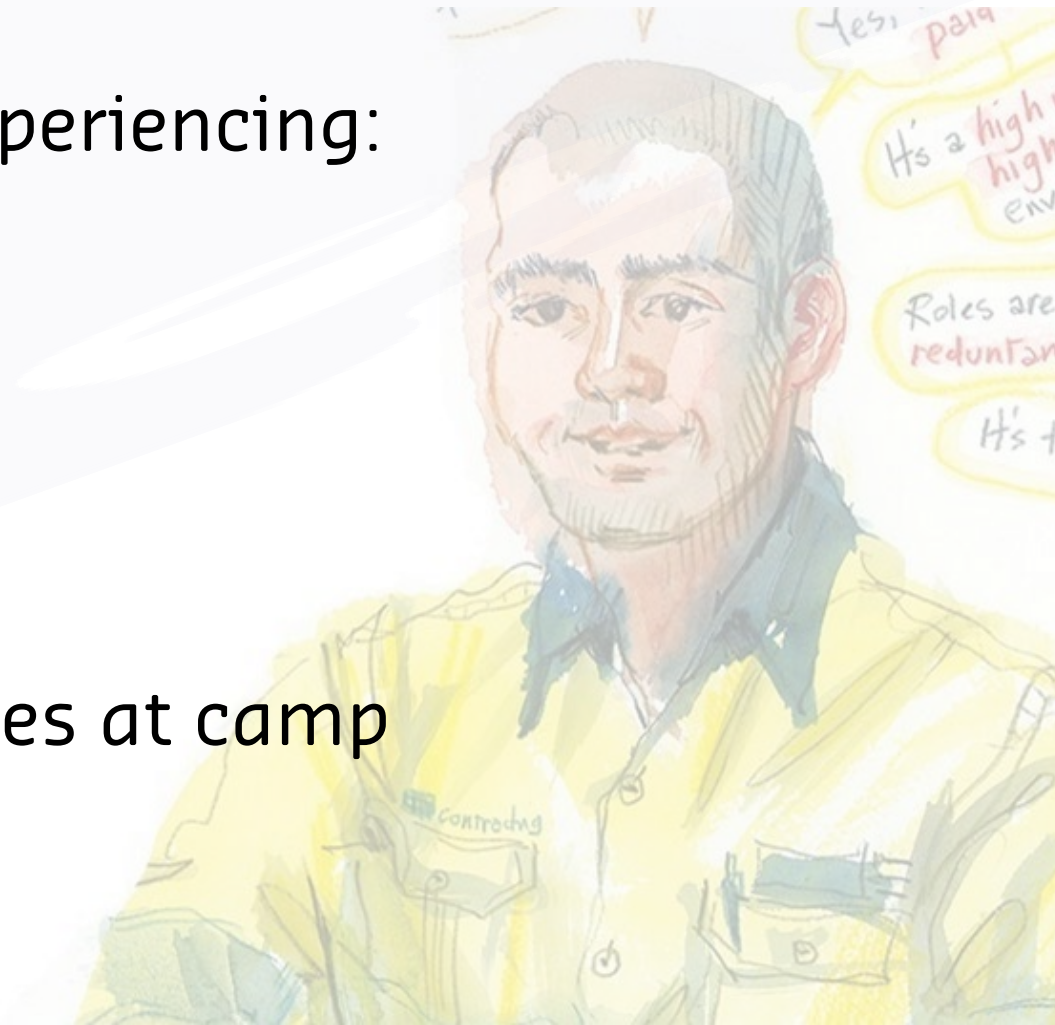
This study was prompted by COVID-19 related changes to FIFO work.

A snapshot of what people have been experiencing:

- Longer rosters
- Quarantine or self-isolation
  - On site
  - At home
- No interstate travel
- Limitations on social and other activities at camp



The impact of these changes on workers were unclear



# 2020 study research methods



## Survey

Experiences of Working FIFO during COVID-19

Main survey launched in May 2020

First follow-up survey 3 weeks later, second follow-up another 3 weeks later.

## What did the survey ask about?

The survey focused on participants' experiences of working FIFO during COVID-19, including changes implemented, and their mental health and wellbeing. The survey also asked about factors that could be potentially threatening, or protective, of mental health and wellbeing.

# Sample demographics



## Sample

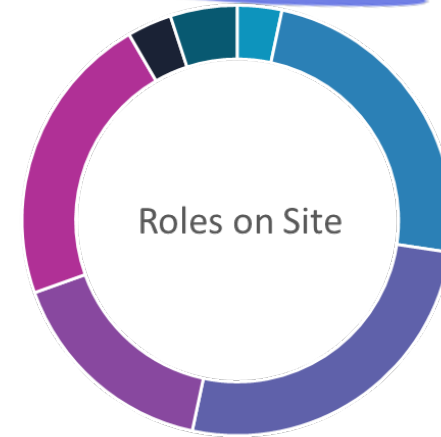
N=362 participants

81.6% men

Mostly aged 35-54

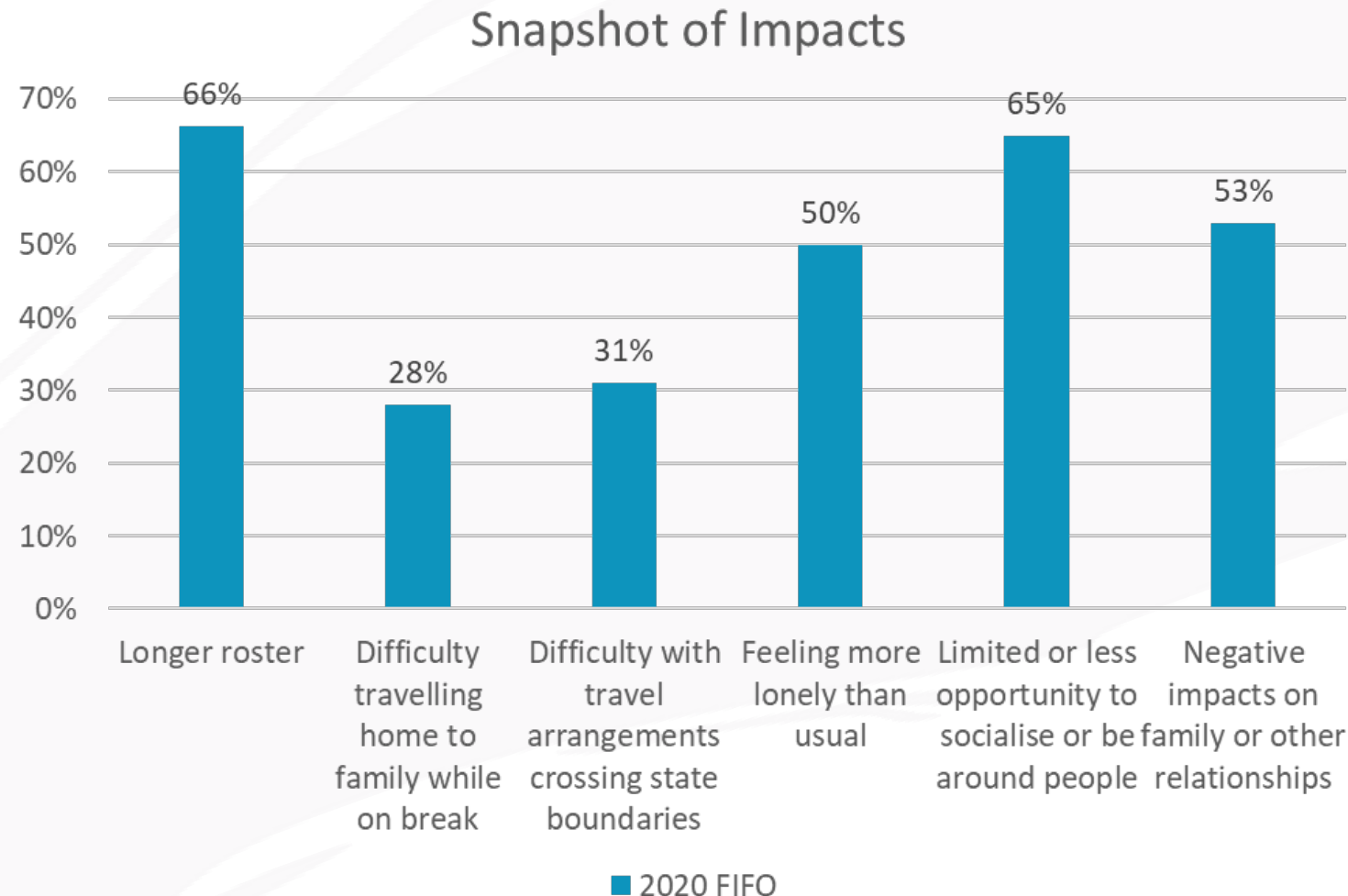
Most married (75%) with at least  
1 dependent child (59%)

Mining (61%), Oil and gas (22%),  
Construction (8%)



- (3.3%) Administrative
- (23.8%) Managerial/Leadership roles
- (25.7%) Professional/Technical roles
- (16.0%) Operator
- (21.9%) Technician or Trade/Maintainers
- (3.3%) Logistics and supply chain
- (6.1%) Other

# Snapshot of COVID-19 Impacts reported by FIFO workers (n=362)

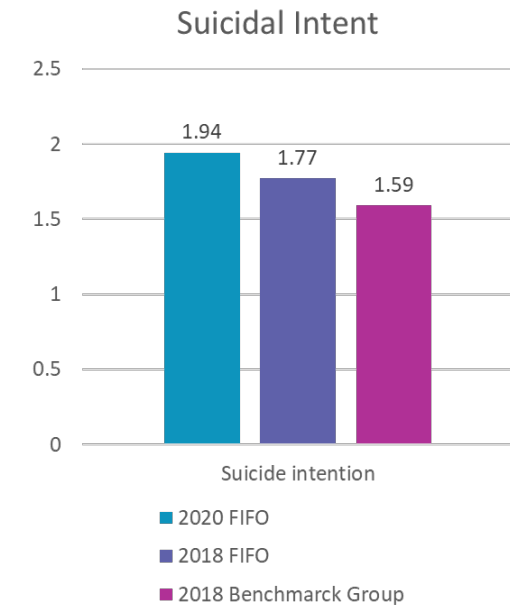
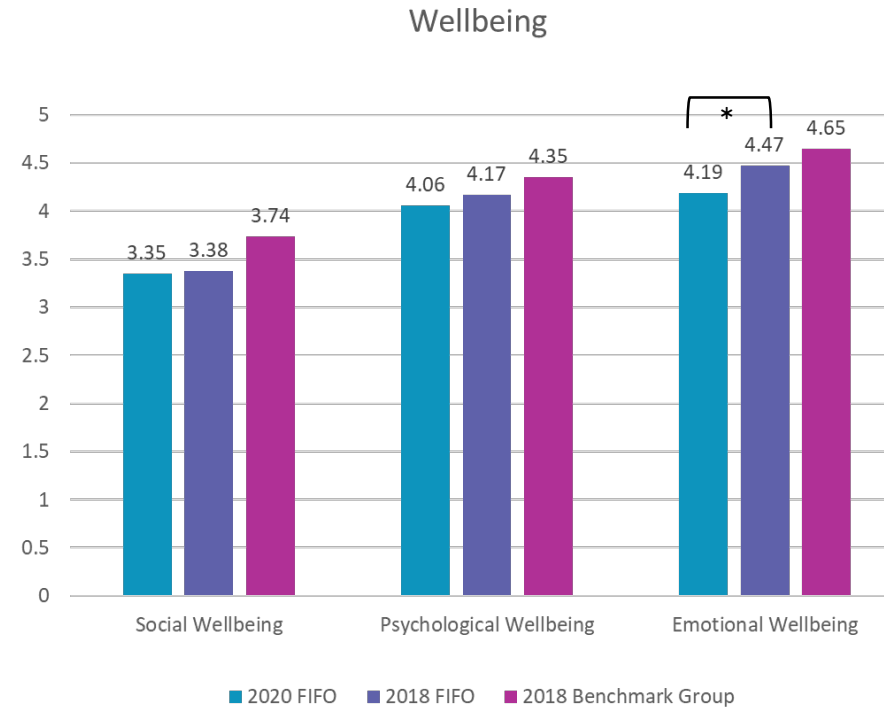
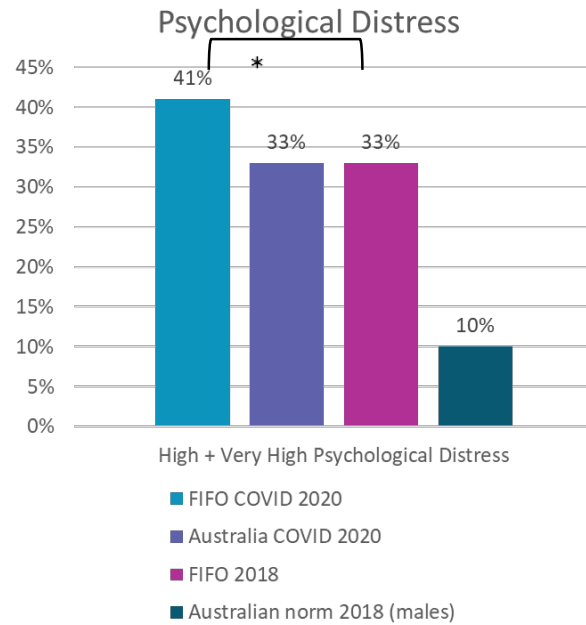


Participants reported experiencing a range of impacts due to COVID-19 related changes, and many participants reported experiencing more than one impact.



# Mental Health Comparison

\*Statistically different from 2018 FIFO sample at  $p=.001$  level



Psychological distress (experiencing depression and anxiety) is presented above detailing the percentage of the sample that fell into either 'high' or 'very high' psychological distress. People in this category are recommended to seek psychological support and treatment. Levels of high + very high psychological distress were significantly higher in the FIFO 2020 sample than in the FIFO 2018 sample. Additionally, a study reporting Australian community K10 psychological distress during COVID-19 reported that 33% of their sample ( $n=587$ ) showed high + very high psychological distress (Rahman et al., 2020). Incidentally, the level of psychological distress reported in the Australian community during COVID-19 is estimated to be similar to FIFO workers before the pandemic (measured in 2018; Parker et al., 2018).

Emotional wellbeing was lower for the FIFO 2020 sample in comparison to the FIFO 2018 sample. This indicates that workers on average felt less happy, less interested and satisfied in life, and generally less optimistic. There was no significant difference between social and psychological wellbeing.

There was no significant difference in levels of suicide intention.

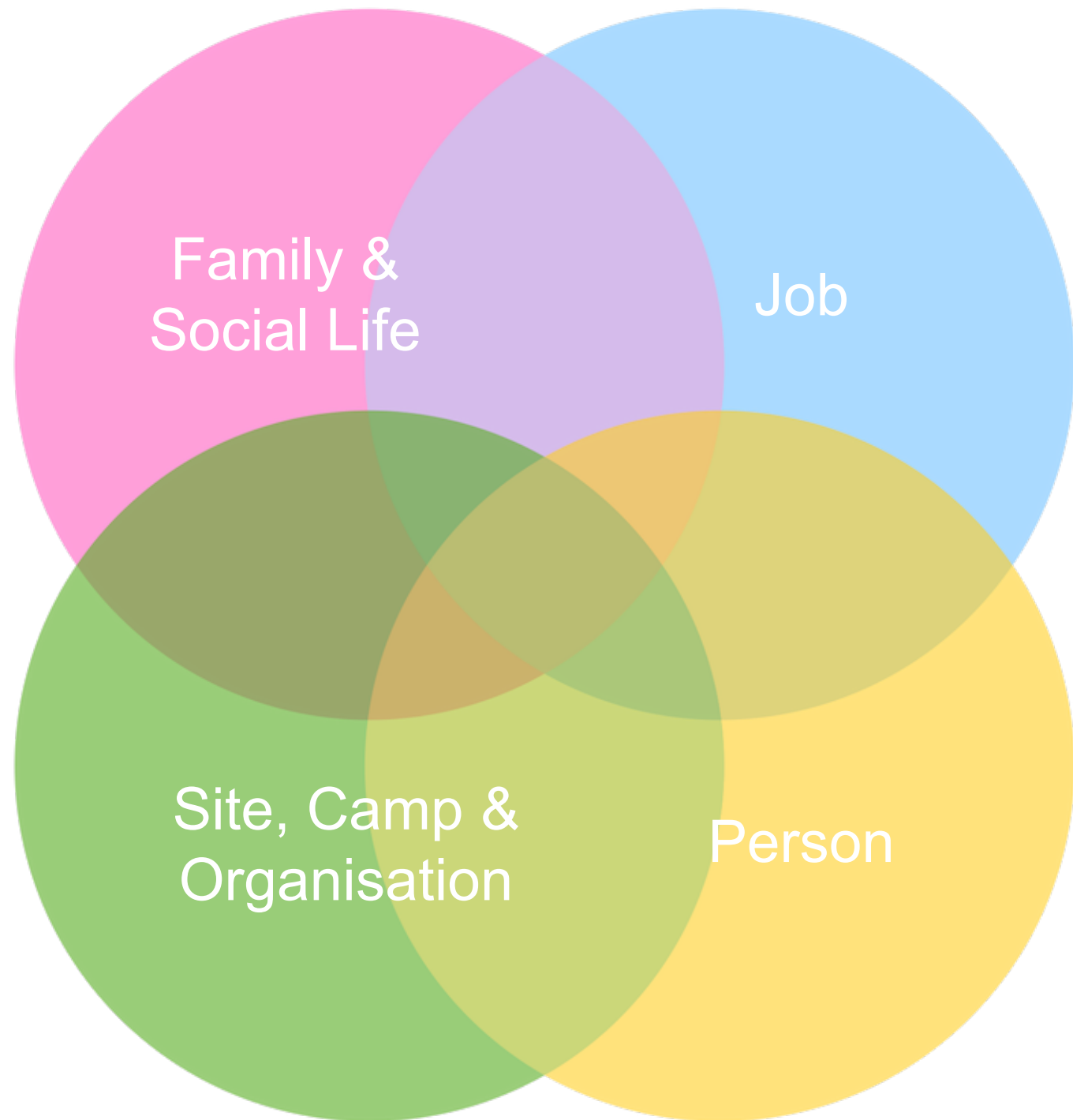
# FIFO work during Covid-19: Key workplace factors

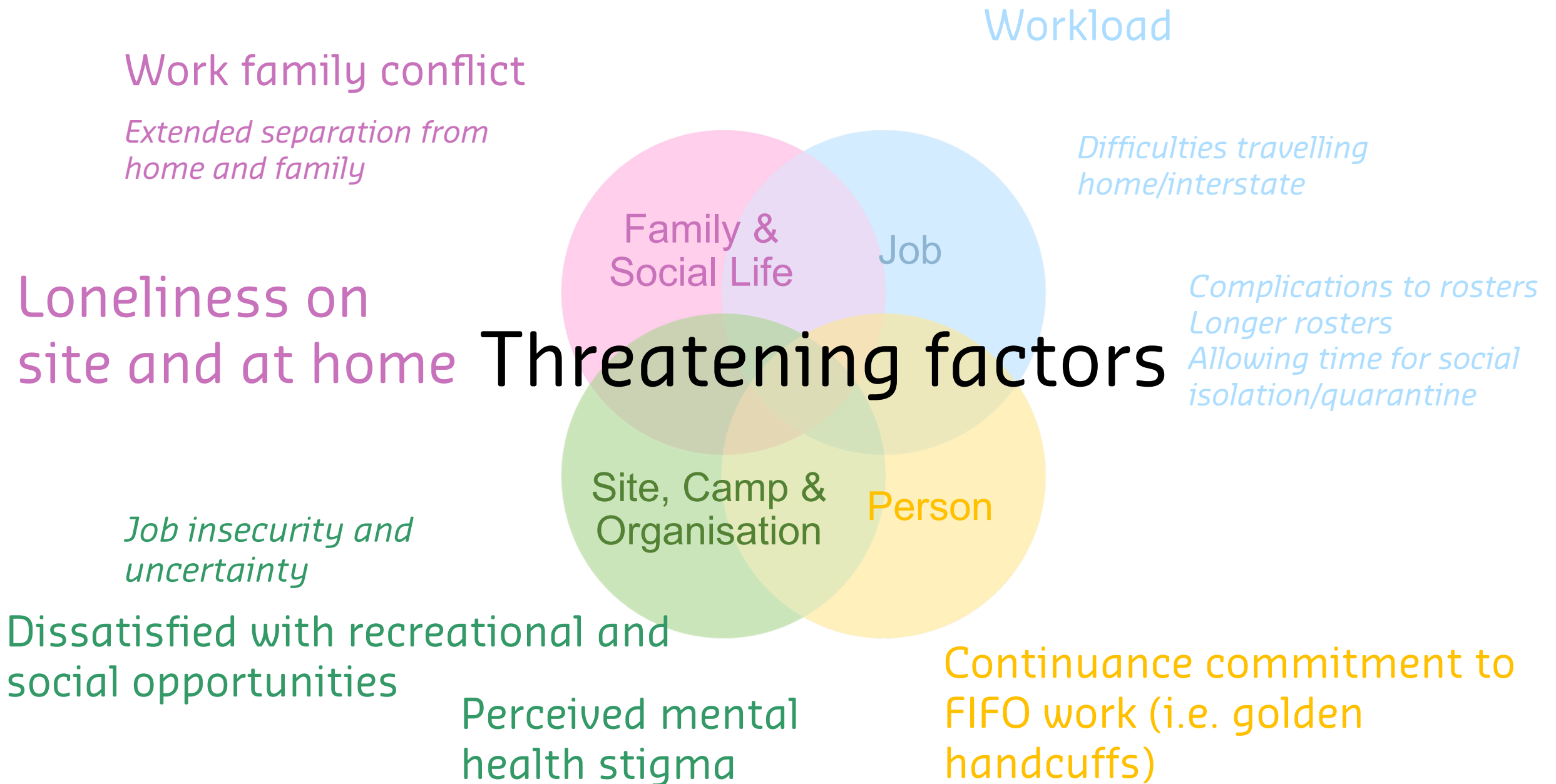
Linking workplace attributes with mental health and wellbeing

Attributes that were threatening to mental health and wellbeing, or protective of mental health and wellbeing, are illustrated next. The larger the text, the stronger the relationship.

The text that appears in *italics* represents factors that were commonly reported as important by participants in the open ended questions.

Supporting mental health for FIFO workers requires the integration of multiple areas – a complex issue requires a multidimensional approach.





*Regular communication  
with family and home*

Perceived social support from  
friends, family, and partner

*Innovative activities on site to  
help keep socially connected*

## Protective factors

Satisfaction with  
recreational and social  
options on site

Perceived support from  
supervisor/line-  
manager

Perceived support  
from co-workers



Work Design - Autonomy

Work Design:  
Task variety

Job satisfaction

Affective  
commitment to  
FIFO (i.e. feeling  
proud to work  
FIFO)



# Overview: Helpful practices on-site

We asked participants what helpful practices their employer was doing that was supporting them during COVID-19. There were a range of strategies discussed, with many participants describing the following practices:

- Clear communication and transparency from companies
- Support with social distancing and good hand hygiene
- Extra cleaning
- Regular COVID-19 testing
- Allowing work from home (to reduce number of people on site)
- Making mental and physical health a priority
  - considerations for workload and fatigue
  - providing options for mental health support
- Quality food (pre-packed options)
- Innovative strategies for keeping people connected
- Taking care of high-risk employees

"Doing fun out-of-work activities (prizes, games etc), and always giving advice on how to manage fatigue, contact home, prioritise work, manage pressure / stress and the mental challenges with long swings away from home."

"My employer organised our isolation accommodation and work site accommodation so that we were next door to friends / close work colleagues / our Peer Supporters"

"Regularly communicated to all staff to let us know what changes that they were making and why."

"Social distancing, charter flights, daily executive Covid review meetings, mental health discussions, free Flu vaccinations, extra Registered Nurse on site, temperature testing."

"They have made me believe that we are doing all we can to ensure we prevent spread to sites, and have provided very good controls."

"They expect 80% work mode over the long swing, with some days at 60% and others at 100% depending on how we are feeling that day."

## What workers are saying

"Extra pay, RDO every week on 4/2 roster, extra annual leave if it lasts 3 months. A bus taking rural employees to Perth to fly in/out."

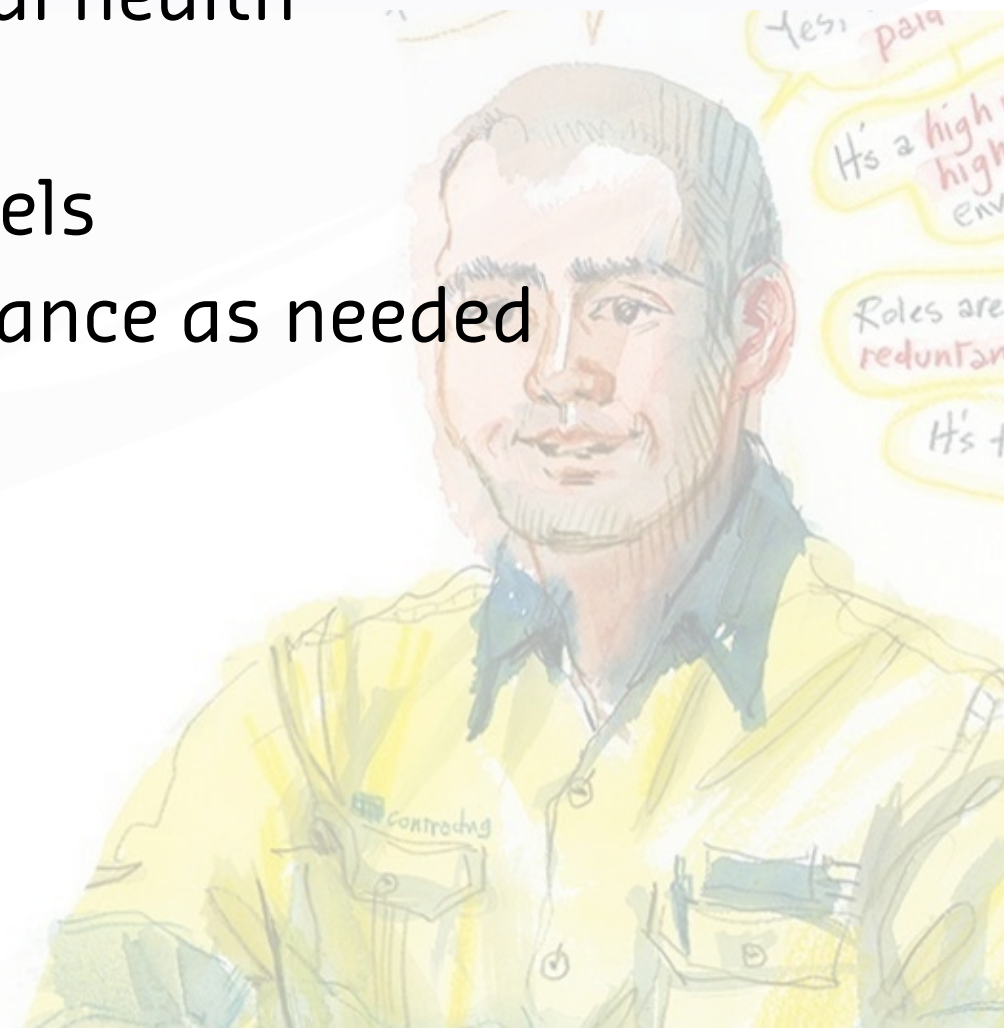
"To help manage us through the longer swings, the Leadership Team have also mandated that if we need to take a few hours one day to sleep, contact home or step back from work we can."

# Key messages from the research

- Results show mental health is worse in 2020
- Support is still a key protective factor for mental health and wellbeing
- Flexibility with workload models (work from home, time off, flexible rosters) is appreciated by workers
- Communication with home is really important to workers, and having flexibility to contact home when needed
- Workers recognise and appreciate social connections on-site
- COVID-19 rules limit people's freedoms, but also make workers feel safe.
- Balancing these rules is important to maintain social connection.

# What is important to consider right now?

- Regularly checking in on workers' mental health
- Providing support
- Flexibility with workload, and work models
- Make accommodations for work-life balance as needed
- Facilitate social connections
  - With home
  - On site



# References

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For more information about the study visit:  
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