

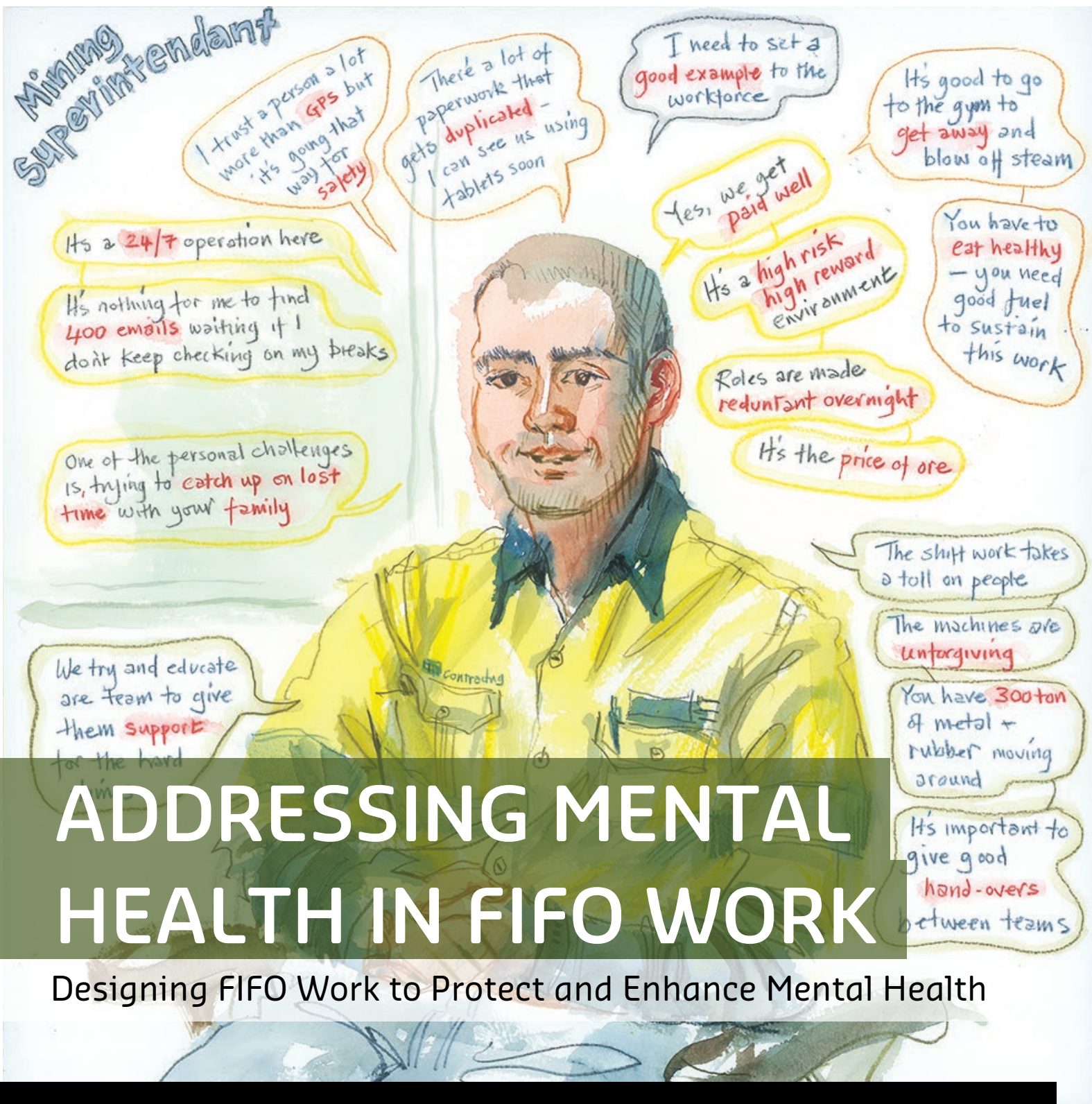


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## SUMMARY

Fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) work practices are common in Western Australia (WA), with the industry providing employment for an estimated 60,000 people<sup>1</sup>. The information presented in this booklet shows a small selection of findings from extensive research conducted by researchers from Curtin University and the University of Western Australia<sup>2</sup>. More than 3000 FIFO workers and partners were surveyed or interviewed. The work was funded by the Mental Health Commission of Western Australia, and supported by a reference group.

The research shows FIFO workers and their partners are an at-risk group for mental ill health. Importantly, the research identifies strategies to protect and enhance FIFO workers' mental health. Focusing on mental health is not only good for workers and their families, but also for productivity and business outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Chamber of Minerals and Energy of WA, 2015; as cited in Education and Health Standing Committee, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Parker, S.K., Fruhen, L.S., et al (2018). Impact of FIFO work arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers. Report prepared for the Western Australian Mental Health Commission <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/2547/impact-of-fifo-work-arrangement-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-fifo-workers-full-report.pdf>

# MENTAL HEALTH

## What is Mental Health?

*Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which a person realises their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community (WHO, 2013). Common mental health issues are depression, anxiety, burnout, or drug and alcohol use.*

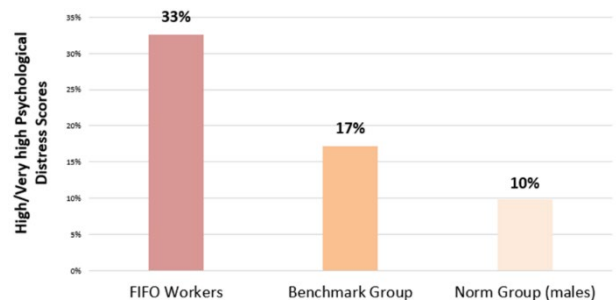
## FIFO Worker Mental Health

Our results show that more FIFO workers suffer from mental health issues than average Australians (norm samples)<sup>3</sup>, as well as people who have a similar demographic profile (the benchmark sample)<sup>4</sup>. In particular, FIFO workers showed:



### Higher Levels of Psychological Distress (Depression and Anxiety)

In comparison to the benchmark and norm sample, FIFO workers indicated the highest level of psychological distress.



### More Frequent Suicidal Thoughts

Compared to the benchmark sample, FIFO workers scored significantly worse on sense of belonging; a measure used to indicate suicidal thoughts. They also reported higher levels of suicidal intent. Some of these differences were explained by demographic variables.



### Worse Levels of Burnout

FIFO workers reported higher levels of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy (measures of burnout) compared to the benchmark sample.

<sup>3</sup> Assessed in comparison with available national norm data e.g. Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2007; National Drug Strategy Household Survey, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Assessed via a matched benchmark sample (matched on main demographics of FIFO sample, i.e. gender, working age, from Western Australia)



# FIFO WORK AND MENTAL HEALTH

Research shows that good work design and a positive workplace culture enhance the mental health and wellbeing of employees. This is also true for FIFO work. Our research identified various aspects of FIFO work that contribute to mental health and well-being<sup>5</sup>:

## OVERVIEW OF PROTECTIVE FIFO WORK FACTORS



### Accommodation on Site

Having a permanent room on-site is linked with better mental health compared to other accommodation arrangements.



### Workplace Culture

Experiencing a culture on site and at camp that upholds mental health as a key value is beneficial for FIFO worker mental health. Similarly, reducing perceptions of stigma and barriers to care can protect FIFO workers. Lower stigma enables workers to openly discuss their issues and to seek support when needed.



### Social Activities

Loneliness on site affects FIFO workers' mental health. From an array of amenities and activities (such as gyms), we found recreational activities with a clear social element such as barbecues and social sports were linked to better mental health in FIFO workers.



### Support from Supervisors & Team Members

FIFO workers benefit from supervisors and team mates that offer are supportive and understanding. Being knowledgeable and being practiced in offering the kind of emotional support that FIFO workers need can be key.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the research also considered individual factors and social and family life factors, however the focus of this summary is on the work environment.



### Work Design

When designing FIFO jobs, job security and adequate workloads are key to protecting worker mental health. Giving employees' autonomy (or agency) as to how they carry out their work (e.g. task scheduling, choosing work methods) protects their mental health and helps them to thrive in their work.

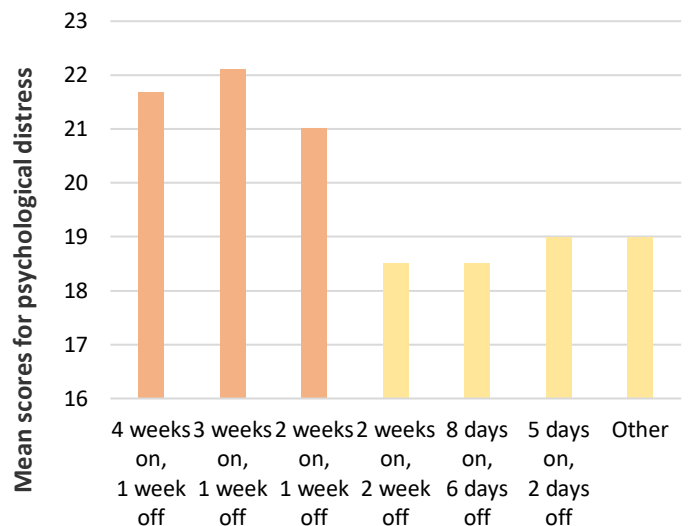


### Rosters

Mental health of FIFO workers varies for different rosters. FIFO workers on even-time and shorter rosters (i.e. 2 weeks on/2 weeks off, 8 days on/6 days off, 5 days on/2 days off) have the best mental health.

Rosters should provide sufficient time to recover during R&R. High compression rosters and travelling long distances can encroach on recovery time of FIFO workers and increase their stress and fatigue levels.

Working dayshifts only was best for FIFO worker mental health.



### Alcohol and Other Drug Use

FIFO workers on average drink more alcohol, and more of them drink at risky levels, compared to norm data and the benchmark group.

Those who experience more autonomy (sense of choice and control) during time off work at camp also report less alcohol consumption. Perceived masculinity norms<sup>6</sup>, stigma, loneliness, home- work life conflict, and difficulty with the psychological transitioning to and from work are associated with riskier drinking patterns.

FIFO workers report taking more illicit drugs than norm groups and the benchmark group.

Alcohol and other drug use can be an (ineffective) coping strategy for FIFO workers.

### SINGLE OCCASION RISKY DRINKING

≥5 standard drinks at least once per month



<sup>6</sup> The behaviours perceived to be normal of the traditional male gender role.

# STRATEGIES

## What can FIFO workers do to improve their own mental health and well-being?

FIFO workers adopt a range of strategies to deal with the mental health implications of their employment. Some of these strategies are positive and are likely to be effective at addressing mental health issues. Other strategies are negative and could harm workers further.

### POSITIVE STRATEGIES

#### Planning



- Make a plan (with partner/family) to include duration of FIFO employment, financial goals, and exit strategy.
- Consider (if possible) a roster and role that suits worker and family requirements.
- Plan ahead for R&R time to ensure worker and family needs are accommodated.

#### Relationships



- Whilst on site, maintain regular communication with family and friends that accommodate everyone's routines.
- Engage in active, open, and positive communication with loved ones.
- Recognise differing family needs and be flexible, especially with children.

#### Support



- Foster relationships on site and talk to supportive colleagues and supervisors.
- For both FIFO worker and partner, foster and maintain friendships and identify support networks in home community.
- Support each other with family and household responsibilities during R&R period.
- Build resilience and resourcefulness to manage time apart.
- Seek help if needed and see this as a strength not a weakness.

#### Health



- When at work take regular breaks.
- Adopt healthy habits physical (exercise and nutrition) and mentally (wind down activities).
- Ensure sufficient rest and manage fatigue during all stages of a swing.

*“Fly in fly out means you don't create partnerships or you don't create friends in that sort of environment. It's actually very isolationist. They move you around the camp. You don't get the same room twice...long work hours, which means that by the end of that day, you don't really make any friends.”*

## NEGATIVE STRATEGIES

### Planning



- No financial, contingency or exit plan and assumed job security.
- Persisting with FIFO work arrangement when there is a significant impact on worker and/ or family mental health and wellbeing.
- No plan for R&R time and negative affect on family, loss of friendships and disengaging from social activities and hobbies.

### Relationships



- Poor understanding of each other's (FIFO worker and partner) needs and stressors when together and apart.
- Not recognising the importance of regular and good communication for nurturing relationships with loved ones. (ie. Family conflict and competing demands).

### Support



- Not seeking help due to organisation not being committed to mental health, stigma evident and leaders not supportive.
- Not raising concerns due to fear of losing job and leaders with a poor management style.

### Health



- Disengaging from feelings and withdrawing from social networks and activities.
- Not talking about concerns and 'putting on a brave face.'
- Using alcohol as a form of coping.
- Accepting or 'putting-up' with work encroaching on R&R time.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## What can Employers and Other Stakeholders Do to Reduce the Mental Health Risks of FIFO Workers?

Employers and other organisations that engage with FIFO workers can do a number of things to reduce possible negative aspects of FIFO work. These can be grouped into three categories of strategies.

### MITIGATE ILLNESS

Supporting those that already suffer from mental health issues

- Recommendation 1:** Develop a culture that prioritises mental health
- Recommendation 2:** Assess psychosocial risks and monitor the mental health of FIFO workers and the factors that affect their mental health
- Recommendation 3:** Provide mental health training for direct line managers
- Recommendation 4:** Address the stigma associated with mental health
- Recommendation 5:** Educate and promote a broad range of support services
- Recommendation 6:** Ensure strategies, policies and procedures are in place to manage mental health emergencies and injury

### PREVENT HARM

Providing systems and enabling capabilities that protect employees from mental health risks

- Recommendation 7:** Increase mental health literacy through information and training for all workers
- Recommendation 8:** Prepare and educate FIFO workers and their families for FIFO work
- Recommendation 9:** Provide reliable communication options and foster connections with home
- Recommendation 10:** Implement initiatives that support FIFO partners and families
- Recommendation 11:** Implement rosters and shift structures that optimise mental health and wellbeing
- Recommendation 12:** Identify and monitor the impact of job roles, work design, workloads and employment contracts on mental health
- Recommendation 13:** Build community and social connections
- Recommendation 14:** Review FIFO camp rules and regulations, and assess the impact on mental health
- Recommendation 15:** Provide a permanent room at accommodation sites
- Recommendation 16:** Recognise the mental health risks of financial stress and job insecurity

### PROMOTE THRIVING

Going beyond reduction of mental health risks and enabling work that enables positive mental health

- Recommendation 17:** Identify and implement strategies and interventions to enable FIFO workers to thrive
- Recommendation 18:** Identify and prioritise further research





Download the full project report here:

<https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/2547/impact-of-fifo-work-arrangement-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-fifo-workers-full-report.pdf>

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