

FIRE NOTE

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COMPETING DEMANDS: FAMILY VERSUS VOLUNTEER EMERGENCY SERVICE WORK

In many countries, including Australia and the United States, emergency response capabilities for most communities (outside of major population centres) are provided by trained volunteers. In Australia, total volunteer-based fire agency memberships declined by about 30% from 1995 to 2003 (McLennan & Birch, 2005). This raises questions about the drivers behind this trend.

Several likely causes of declining volunteer memberships have been identified, including broad economic and demographic factors (McLennan & Birch, 2005). However, organisational and work processes have also been implicated in volunteer dissatisfaction and turnover (Lewig, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Dollard & Metzger, 2007). For instance, McLennan, Birch, Cowlshaw and Hayes (2008) reported reasons why volunteers resigned from a large volunteer-based fire agency and noted the role of conflicts between firefighting and volunteers' family and work commitments.

The scant research available on the impacts of volunteer work on family was reviewed by Cowlshaw, Evans and McLennan (2008), who reported indirect evidence suggesting time- and strain-based conflicts between emergency service volunteering and family. For example, focus groups with Victorian volunteers (CFA Corporate, 1998) indicated that many firefighters were aware of impacts of volunteering on family life, while studies of the partners of career (i.e., paid) emergency service workers in the U.S. (Regehr, Dimitropolous, Bright, George & Henderson, 2005) suggest that shift-work, feelings of being a lesser priority to emergency activities, a lack of time together as a couple, and having to manage reactions to stressful or traumatic incidents had negative effects on family relationships.

Direct evidence on the work-family lives of emergency services volunteers and the experiences of family members is



SUMMARY

Data indicate declining numbers of volunteer emergency service workers and suggest that competing demands from volunteering and family contribute to these falling numbers. This project points to the critical need for cultural change within emergency service organisations in order to better support and retain volunteers. It examined the nature of competing demands from volunteer work and family, and the implications of such conflicts for emergency service volunteers and their partners. The research comprised interviews with the managers of volunteers, as well as a quantitative survey of couples in which one partner was an emergency service volunteer. Results identified various impacts on family from volunteer work (e.g., greater household demands being placed on other family members; changes in volunteers' behaviour after distressing incidents), and indicated that conflicts between volunteering and family could result in adverse outcomes for volunteers, their partners and families. The findings thus advance understanding of how volunteering may impact on family life, and inform recommendations and strategies for volunteer management and emergency service organisations to minimise negative impacts of volunteer work on family.

lacking. No studies could be found that collected systematic information from Australian emergency service volunteers and their partners. However, such research is vital to inform agency strategies for minimising difficulties associated with managing demands from emergency service work and family, thus promoting positive outcomes for volunteers, their families, and organisations (e.g., through increased volunteer retention). The current research provided a focused investigation of volunteer work-family conflict in the emergency services.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Project D3 Enhancing Volunteerism is part of Bushfire CRC Program D: Protection of People and Property. This Fire Note is based on primary author Sean Cowlshaw's PhD research.

The authors: the authors are all based within the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University, where Sean Cowlshaw is a Bushfire CRC PhD candidate; Dr Lynette Evans is a lecturer; and Professor Jim McLennan is an Adjunct Professor.

BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

Given the lack of direct research available, the aims of the current project were to:

1. Explore the nature of impacts of volunteer emergency service work on family
2. Examine the consequences of these conflicts for volunteers and their partners; and thus
3. Provide data necessary to develop strategies for emergency service agencies to minimise negative impacts of volunteer work on family.

The current research involved two empirical studies which collected data on the work-family interactions of emergency service volunteers.

FURTHER READING

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- Lewig, K.A., Xanthopoulou, D., Bakker, A.B., Dollard, M.F., & Metzger, J.C. (2007). Burnout and connectedness among Australian volunteers: A test of the job demands-resources model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 71, 429-445.
- McLennan, J., & Birch, A. (2005). A potential crisis in wildfire emergency response capability? Australia's volunteer firefighters. *Environmental Hazards*, 6, 101-107.
- McLennan, J., Birch, A., Cowlishaw, S., & Hayes, P. (2008). *Maintaining volunteer firefighter numbers: Adding value to the retention coin*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
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Study 1 – Interviews with managers of volunteer firefighters.

As an exploratory stage of research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 managers of Victorian CFA volunteer firefighters. Interviews were conducted at fire stations and CFA regional headquarters across Victoria. The questions were based on the goals of the research and previous findings concerning the families of career emergency workers. In particular, the interview protocol asked about managers' perceptions of the general pressures impacting on volunteers and those aspects of the volunteer firefighter role seen by the managers to be difficult for families. In addition, the protocol contained probes addressing more specific issues: the day-to-day aspects of the volunteer role; less common, but potentially more demanding emergency situations; difficulties faced by families when the volunteer was away for longer periods; and what demands families faced when the volunteer returned home from a stressful incident. Interviews were analysed according to an inductive thematic analysis procedure, using the computerised data analysis software package NVIVO Version 7.

Study 2 – Quantitative investigation of volunteer couples.

Study 2 comprised a confirmatory quantitative investigation based on self-report data collected from couples in which one partner was an emergency service volunteer. Invitations to participate were made to couples through stories in the general media and advertisements placed in the internal publications of cooperating emergency service agencies across Australia. Responses were obtained from 113 couples, in which one partner was a firefighter (89%), ambulance officer (7%) or emergency rescue volunteer (4%). These participating couples provided data on volunteer Work-Family Conflict (WFC), as well as likely antecedents (e.g., post-traumatic stress symptoms) and outcomes (e.g., volunteer burnout) of such WFC. Data were then analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) analysis, which permitted: (a) evaluation of the overall adequacy of proposed theoretical models explaining relationships among the likely antecedents and outcomes of WFC; and (b) the direction and strength of these predictive relationships.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Study 1 – Exploratory interviews

Results of the interviews presented an organisational perspective on volunteer work-family interactions. Thematic data illustrated specific impacts on family life, associated with:

1. Additional demands (household and farm management) placed on family members
2. Unpredictable interruptions to family life from emergency call-outs
3. A general lack of time with family
4. Changes in volunteers' behaviour at home associated with attending distressing emergency incidents
5. Partners' anxiety about safety, and
6. Financial pressures from lost income.



Furthermore, there was evidence of a general tendency of volunteers to prioritise fire brigade demands ahead of family responsibilities, which appeared to account for many of these more specific impacts on family.

Study 2 – Investigation of volunteer couples

The quantitative findings then provided direct evidence from Australian emergency service volunteers and their partners.

First, partners provided reports on the common sources of difficulty associated with managing demands from emergency service work and family life. These were:

END USER STATEMENT

“It is recognised within Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) that one of our major volunteer retention issues is the conflict between volunteering and family. This research confirms this view and provides clear statements and priorities regarding the various issues and the people who are being impacted.

“This research has served to confirm that we are heading in the right direction with strategies currently being implemented within the Service, such as management training for First Officers, and has provided relevant and supported suggestions for strategies that will further combat these issues and improve volunteer retention and work life balance.”

– **Steve Rothwell,**
Assistant Commissioner Rural
Operations,
Queensland Fire and Rescue Service



1. Feeling worried or anxious about the volunteer attending emergencies (58%)
2. Disturbed sleep when the volunteer was responding to emergencies during the night (56%)
3. Have to compensate for the volunteer by doing extra work around the home (56%)
4. Unpredictable callouts causing the volunteer to cancel planned family activities (53%)
5. The volunteer missing family activities due to time away on emergency service activities (39%)
6. The family seeming to take a lower priority to emergency service activities (35%).

Second, the data were used to evaluate statistical models accounting for likely antecedents and outcomes associated with volunteer Work-Family Conflict (WFC). In particular, results indicated that work-related antecedents, such as time invested in ‘on-call’ volunteer work and post-traumatic stress symptoms, both predicted higher levels of conflict reported by the volunteer and their partner. Furthermore, WFC was found to be a predictor of:

1. Increased burnout from the emergency services as reported by the volunteer
2. Lowered support for the volunteer role as reported by their partner
3. Decreased family relationship quality as reported by the couple.

CRC RESEARCH BEING USED

The current research provides valuable evidence linking impacts of volunteering on family to negative outcomes for

volunteers and organisations, and suggests useful strategies for helping to reduce such adverse impacts (see box below). Anecdotal evidence suggests a culture within some volunteer emergency service organisations characterised by: (a) the view that volunteers’ work-family difficulties are ‘their own business’ and that the agency has no role in addressing these issues; and (b) a reluctance to change with the times, despite evidence that such changes could improve volunteer management practices. It is clear that such changes in organisational cultures cannot come from outside agencies. Rather, it will be necessary for organisations to proactively implement incentives for managers to be alert to emerging

problematic volunteer work-family issues and to address these.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Compared to work in a paid organisation, processes impacting on volunteer workers (and their families) are poorly understood. The current research suggests a clear need for further research on such volunteer work processes. There are many possible directions for future investigation, including the adaptation of existing, more general models of work-family conflict, work stress, leadership, and social identity processes, to help understand the factors impacting on volunteers, their stress/satisfaction, and the effects these have on worker and organisational outcomes.

SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS’ FAMILIES

This research suggests potential strategies to minimise adverse impacts of volunteer work on family:

- (1) Provide information (e.g., about demands on families; support services) to the partners of volunteers, such as through components of volunteer induction packages for families, and by including partners in training and induction procedures
- (2) Develop local networks of families and encourage these communities to devise their own support systems, while providing the resources needed to foster these networks

(3) Encourage initiatives by the managers of volunteers. Locally-based managers may be able to identify volunteers who are overloaded with volunteering and work and family responsibilities, and assist volunteers to achieve better volunteering-family balance, for example, by providing a short-term leave of absence (and organising volunteers to compensate for their absence) or temporary shift to a non-operational role in order to address family demands.

[Detailed discussion of recommendations for agencies can be found in Cowlshaw, McLennan and Evans (2008) and Cowlshaw, Evans and McLennan (in press).]

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AFAC is the peak representative body for fire, emergency services and land management agencies in the Australasia region. It was established in 1993 and has 26 full and 10 affiliate members.