

Fly-in Fly-out, Social Support and the Male Workforce

Ethics approval number: 2014/039

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FIFO (fly-in fly-out) refers to a work arrangement that involves a long distance commute. The term long distance commute is used when the distance between a workers home and a workplace is so great, that a daily commute is not practical, but more often impossible. FIFO is common practice in the mining and oil and gas industry in Australia, in particular in Western Australia and Queensland. It is however not restricted to the resource sector. Military, construction, health and other service providers in remote regions use FIFO workers.

Most FIFO work involves travel to and from the work site by air. Other forms of long distance commuting are DIDO (drive-in, drive-out) and BIBO (bus-in, bus-out). FIFO is common in Western Australia due to the state's natural resources. FIFO employees work on rotation, which vary considerably in length. The employer provides the transport to and from the work site, and accommodation and food while the employee is at work. FIFO workers are often housed in camps with portable structures where they sleep (donga).

The mining industry uses FIFO workers to meet the demand for skilled personnel in remote areas where mines are located. FIFO work practices do not only suit the employer, there are also benefits for the employee. Over the last ten years employment in the Western Australian resources sector has grown significantly. Despite the rapid increase in the FIFO workforce, there is a lack of research with regard to the work practice and health and wellbeing of workers. Working in the mining and resources sector in rural and remote Australia is challenging. Both the government and the wider community have voiced their concerns about FIFO work and what effect it may have.

To examine the impact of FIFO work practices, the Federal Government commissioned an inquiry in 2013. The Federal Government found no evidence to support claims that FIFO workers were more at risk for mental health problems, compared to other groups. Serious concerns however did highlight the necessity to further investigate the health effects of FIFO work arrangements. In 2014 an inquiry by the Western Australian Parliament's Education and Health Standing Committee commenced. In the time since the federal report appeared, nine FIFO workers took their lives in Western Australia alone.

FIFO workers face a range of challenges such as working in a harsh climate and social isolation. On top of which employees work long hours/rosters and are presented with work stresses, for example concerns about safety. It has been suggested that working in such a demanding environment may lead to mental health problems (stress, depression, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, substance abuse) and relationship breakdowns. Despite the recent media attention and policy and program development more research is required.

In Western Australia approximately 58,000 people are FIFO workers, of which about 85 percent are male. The majority of FIFO workers are relatively young, 25-44 years old, and work as a tradesperson. Beyondblue, a mental health organization, reported that manual workers, unskilled and blue-collar workers, and employees in lower status occupations were at risk for mental health problems.

Generally men are reluctant to access support service because of stigma toward seeking help, and a belief that it would be 'unmanly'. Due to social pressure men prefer to rely on themselves, their work colleagues and family and friends, rather than seek professional help, or support that is provided by a company.. Most mining companies offer formal support (employee assistance program's), however the use of health and wellbeing services is low, even though one in five workers may require help within a given year. To increase the uptake of services that are provided by employers, supports should be designed to suit men's help-seeking styles.

Social support may protect individuals from some of the negative affects of stress, and can have a positive effect on a person's wellbeing. Social support can be viewed either as the structure of relationships (social network, marital status, numbers of friends and family, and how well they know each other), or from the functions that the social support provide. Functions can be emotional support (care, love), offering information and advice, companionship and tangible support (doing chores, cooking). Social support might protect against negative effects during times of stress, or might simply have a direct effect on mental health and wellbeing.

This thesis explored social support across job-levels (Manager, Supervisor, Trade) in the male FIFO workforce. In particular whether the group that is most at risk, Trade, would report less social support. Survey responses from a sample of 381 male FIFO participants to questions in relation to how often a particular type of social support was available to them, were analyzed. It also looked at any relationship between age and social support as young people (19-29 year old workers), are more likely to access supports than older people. The occupational groups in the study were a concise representation of the workforce, and participants were assigned to groups based on which level of employee they were.

Trade did not report less social support than the other groups, nor was a relationship found between age and social support. This could be due to some of the limitations of the study. Sometimes when questionnaires are used participants wish to create a better self-image, or have strong feelings about the issues and that may affect their responses. Furthermore, if workers have knowledge of the challenges of FIFO work they may choose not to work in FIFO, or might leave the workforce. Investigations of the different functions of social support could offer insight into the type of support that suits different groups of male workers best, and is most effective in stressful times. Such knowledge would aid policy and program development. Health and wellbeing prevention efforts and supports for male FIFO workers would be both targeted and relevant. Furthermore resource companies could avoid wasted costs on underused services.

Finally, it has been noted that FIFO workers have a low level of mental health literacy. Mental health literacy is knowledge about how to prevent, intervene and treat mental health problems, and how to support people who experience them. If FIFO workers do not recognize and acknowledge they have a mental health problem, seeking help becomes even more difficult. Development of services should consider men's help-seeking style and social support, but also focus on increasing the FIFO community's mental health literacy. The workforce as a whole is then equipped to take action for better mental health.