



REDUCING BURNOUT THROUGH PEER SUPPORT AND SOCIAL BELONGING:

A FIELD EXPERIMENT WITH CORRECTIONS OFFICERS AND STAFF OF THE DENVER SHERIFF DEPARTMENT

The challenge

Burnout is a growing challenge to the American workforce. In fact, burnout affects one in two front-line workers across the US and has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the individual level, burnout is associated with negative physical and psychological outcomes, such as sleep problems, misuse of painkillers, coronary heart disease, and mental health challenges. At the organizational level, it is associated with high rates of absenteeism and turnover as well as programmatic interruptions.

Correctional workers, in particular, have some of the highest rates of burnout among frontline workers. Considering the outsized impact that correctional officer decision making can have on the experience of the incarcerated population, understanding and improving officer wellbeing is a critical component in broader efforts to rethink public safety.

What we did

We partnered with the Denver Sheriff Department (DSD) to develop a pilot program aimed at reducing burnout by fostering feelings of social belonging among deputies and civilian staff. The goal was to strengthen social connectedness and peer support by nudging employees to share their experiences and advice with each other through a confidential online platform.

We randomly assigned 1,062 deputies and civilian staff into two groups: an individual support group (with 533 employees) and a peer support group (with 529 employees). Those assigned to the peer support group received weekly emails containing a peer-focused wellness-oriented prompt for participants to respond anonymously to an online platform. The overarching goal of the prompt was to offer a space for employees to feel they could share advice and perspectives with their fellow employees.

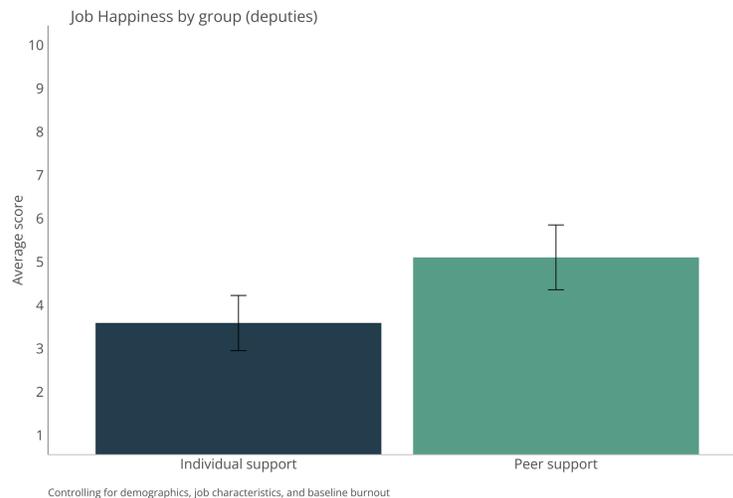
In contrast, those assigned to the individual support group received weekly emails with *individually-focused*, wellness-oriented prompts. These emails included an invitation to participate in a private, online journaling activity to reflect on ways individuals can take care of themselves and support their own wellbeing.

We expected that the peer support group would experience reductions in burnout and turnover in comparison to the individual support group. We measured changes in well-being, burnout, and other outcomes in both groups with a survey before the pilot program (33% response rate) and two follow up surveys collected at one month (23% response rate) and six months (23% response rate) after the program ended.

Our findings

Our follow-up surveys found that those in the peer support group reported greater well-being compared with those in the individual support group, among those who completed the baseline and final surveys, and these impacts were overwhelmingly driven by improvements among deputies. Access to peer support programming resulted in significantly lower levels of burnout and significantly increased overall job happiness (see Figure 1), as well as feelings of being understood by fellow staff, agency leadership, and even family and friends. The peer support group was also more likely to endorse a positive, helping view of government and was less likely to maintain beliefs about incarcerated individuals at their site as dangerous. Moving forward, it will be important to track how these shifts in perspective may translate into impacts on aspects of service delivery among those who participated in the peer support program.

Figure 1: Impact of Pilot Program on Happiness in the Job among deputies



Next Steps

Understanding how peer engagement and social support can mitigate employee burnout is crucial for ensuring the health and wellbeing of employees. These findings suggest that DSD - and other public agencies struggling with staff burnout - can benefit from the development of pilot programs aimed at fostering social connections, normalizing help-seeking behavior, and accessing wellness resources. The study also provides important evidence on the benefits of creating space for open, honest, and safe discussions about employees' experiences with stressors on the job, and how peers and supervisors can create a culture of continual improvement. Especially in the context of the community safety and correctional field, these results have profound implications for policy-making and organizational culture. Ongoing examination of administrative data will reveal whether the pilot program reduces turnover rates and decreases instances of the use of force among peer support group members.



Additional Resources

Related Research

- [Prisons and mental health: Violence, organizational support, and the effects of Correctional work \(Lerman et al., 2021\)](#)
- [Prisons and Mental Health: Violence, Organizational Support, and the Effects of Correctional Work \(Lerman, Harney & Sadin, 2021\)](#)
- [Clarifying the role of coping on officer turnover in corrections \(Harney & Lerman, 2021\)](#)
- [Reducing Burnout and Resignations among Frontline Workers: A Field Experiment \(Linos, 2021\)](#)
- [Reducing Burnout and Resignations Among 911 Dispatchers](#)

For more information visit our website project page [here](#).

ABOUT US

The People Lab aims to transform the public sector, by producing cutting-edge research on the people in government and the communities they serve. We collaborate with governments and other stakeholders to evaluate strategies that can strengthen the public-sector workforce, improve public service delivery, and foster engaged communities. Our team brings together public management scholars, behavioral economists, political scientists and public policy experts who are committed to evidence-based policy making, and who use rigorous quantitative, qualitative, and experimental methods to better understand what works. All projects are co-designed with our partners to ensure feasibility and scalability. Visit us at peoplelab.berkeley.edu.