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VICTORIA POLICE

2017 VICTORIA POLICE

# Mental Health and Wellbeing Study Summary



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# Foreword

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I am pleased to present the *2017 Victoria Police Mental Health and Wellbeing Study*.

This study is the first of its kind to be conducted by Victoria Police, and was one of the most important recommendations to come from the *2016 Mental Health Review*.



Findings from this study have provided valuable information about the types and prevalence of mental health issues across our workforce, and will be used to provide a baseline from which to direct more effective delivery of services and programs.

It is pleasing to see that work has already commenced to deliver better and more targeted mental health and wellbeing support for our members, including increased education and training around mental health, greater focus on welfare of employees by leaders, and enhanced support services throughout the employee career lifecycle and for families. It is my hope that individuals and work groups alike will expand on this good work by considering how the results could be applied at a local level.

This study forms part of our ongoing efforts to genuinely acknowledge the responsibility we share for looking after the mental health and wellbeing of Victoria Police employees. It is what we do with this information that is now critical to ensuring Victoria Police employees are mentally fit, ready, and capable to contribute to a safer Victoria.

Thank you to those who participated in this study, I appreciate your commitment to improving our mental health and wellbeing, and encourage all members to take the opportunity to educate yourself on the issue and through this, contribute to a better workplace for all.

**Graham Ashton AM**  
**Chief Commissioner**

# Background

Victoria Police employees are likely to be regularly exposed to potentially traumatic events, which may or may not impact their mental health and wellbeing, however, a combination of stressors in employees' personal lives and organisational climate (perceptions of how disclosures of mental health concerns will be received by peers and management, interactions with co-workers, barriers to help-seeking, stigma, workload pressures, and job satisfaction) also impact employee wellbeing. Cumulative incident exposure, personal relationship issues and organisational climate can often be triggers for the onset of mental health problems and increased suicide risk.

The *2016 Mental Health Review* (MHR) highlighted that the mental health of employees was an important issue in Victoria Police and that there was a lack of robust prevalence data. To clearly establish the nature and scope of the issue, data was required to fully understand the problem before meaningful work could begin. Gaining a more accurate picture of the types of mental health issues impacting Victoria Police employees would:

1. Provide direction for future initiatives to improve wellbeing within the organisation by highlighting the specific mental health issues identified within this population;
2. Ensure efficient allocation of resources in this area; and
3. Create a baseline of the prevalence and severity of mental health symptoms, stigma, and help-seeking behaviour to allow for appropriate evaluation of the effectiveness of the *Victoria Police Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2017-2020*.

As such, the MHR recommended that a survey be conducted to gather this information.

## MHR Recommendation 1:

That Victoria Police undertakes a prevalence study to gain accurate data on the organisational mental health and suicide risk profile.

## MHR Recommendation 11:

Consideration of an organisational climate survey for the next iteration of the Victoria Police culture change program to assist in driving increased people-related accountabilities.

# Methodology

Questions that the prevalence study aimed to answer were as follows:

1. What is the current prevalence of mental health symptoms in Victoria Police?
2. What is the current severity of mental health symptoms in Victoria Police?
3. How confident are Victoria Police employees to engage in mental health conversations with their colleagues?
4. How confident are Victoria Police employees to approach their managers/supervisors to discuss gaining support for mental health concerns?
5. What barriers to care do Victoria Police members experience?
6. What regions/departments require further psychological support and intervention?

To give all employees an opportunity to participate, an online survey was chosen to capture the required information. A survey questionnaire was developed by Victoria Police in consultation with subject matter experts: The Police Association Victoria, The Commonwealth Public Sector Union, and The Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (Phoenix Australia). Employee representatives from a variety of regions and classifications provided input into the development of the questionnaire. The questionnaire included validated and reliable measures of different mental health conditions, which allowed for Victoria Police's results to be compared with results found within the Australian community (community norms).

The *Victoria Police Mental Health and Wellbeing Study* (the Prevalence Study) was conducted by Monash University between 25 October – 15 November 2017.

All Victoria Police employees were invited to complete the anonymous survey via email using an embedded survey link. Ethics approval was obtained from Victoria Police Human Research Ethics Committee and the study was registered with the Monash Human Research Ethics Committee.

A total of 5,884 employees completed the online survey, representing 30% of the total workforce at that time (1,544 = Victorian Public Servant, 4,232 = Sworn, 108 = Prefer not to say).

## Interpretation of key findings and response

When interpreting the data shown in this report, please note:

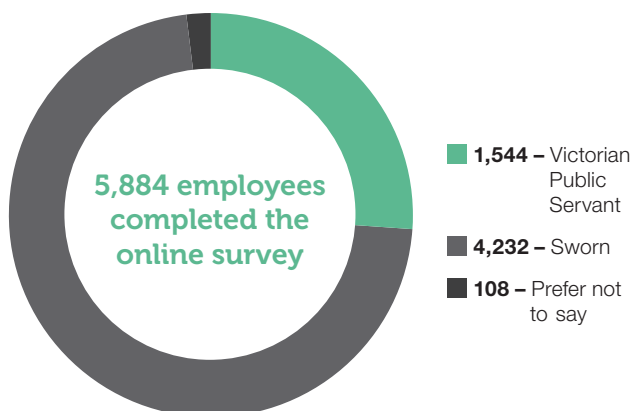
These findings have been extracted from the full report as they are noteworthy and have been prioritised for intervention. If you would like further information about the report please contact [mental-health-program-office@police.vic.gov.au](mailto:mental-health-program-office@police.vic.gov.au).

To fully understand the prevalence rates of mental health conditions reported by Victoria Police employees, prevalence rates were compared with those found in the general Australian community (as reported in the *2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics). In this report, the comparison is shown by VP = X% vs AUS = Y%.

One of the primary objectives of the Prevalence Study was to provide a 'baseline' of the organisation's mental health, stigma and help-seeking which could then be used to provide a measurable assessment of Victoria Police's progress towards a more supportive culture around mental health.

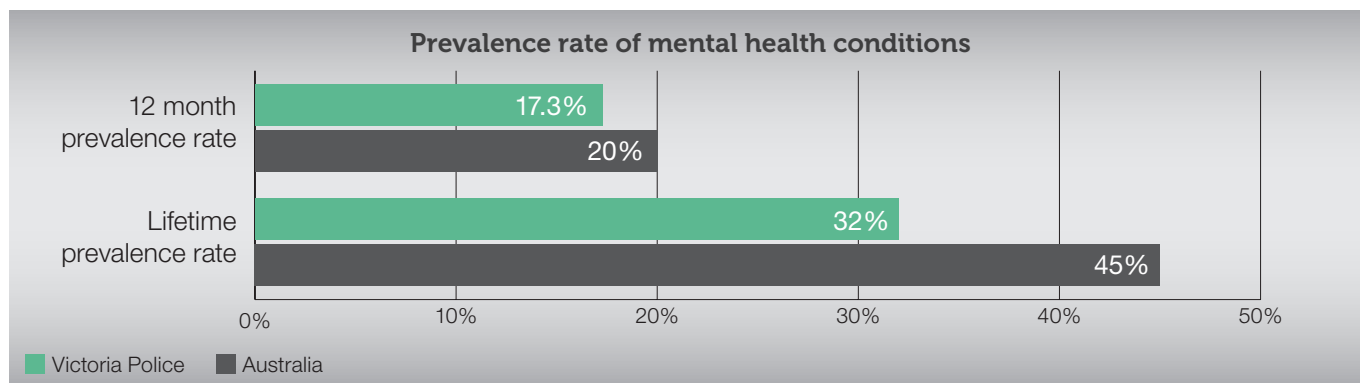
***The Prevalence Study did not make recommendations.***

As such, it is acknowledged that many of the gaps highlighted by the study will be addressed through longer term and multiple 'cultural' change initiatives as opposed to any single initiative. Cultural change will also be driven with the maturation of the *Victoria Police Capability Plan 2016-2025*, the *Mental Health Strategy and Wellbeing Action Plan 2017-2020* (The Strategy), *The Leadership Capability Uplift Project* (People Development Command), and the development and introduction of Mental Health Literacy programs across all levels of the organisation at key career milestones as part of the *Victorian Government Community Safety Statement 2017*.



# Key Findings

When compared to the general Australian community, Victoria Police employees have a lower lifetime prevalence rate of mental health conditions (VP = 32% vs AUS = 45%) and a lower 12 month prevalence rate of mental health conditions (VP = 17.3% vs AUS = 20%).



## 1. Depression rates for Victoria Police are above community norms

When mental health conditions were examined individually, depression was the most common condition reported: 19.9% of participants reported having received a diagnosis at some point in their lifetime and 8.5% reported to currently have clinically diagnosed depression. These rates are higher than the Australian general community rates for depression.

A standardised measure of symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress was used and 32% of participants indicated that they experienced mild to extremely severe symptoms of

depression. Furthermore, the mean depression severity score for Victoria Police was found to be significantly higher than the Australian community norms.

Depression was the mental health condition most associated with suicide attempts (77% of participants who reported making an attempt also had a diagnosis of depression).



## Key Findings (continued)

### 2. Differences in anxiety symptoms between metro/regional locations

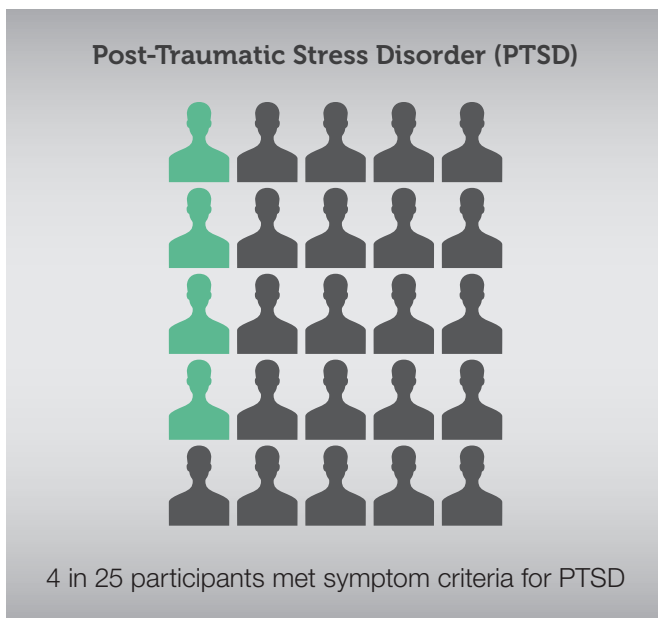
The study found that employees from regional areas were more likely to report experiencing anxiety symptoms compared to metropolitan employees; specifically, they were 26% more likely to report symptoms of anxiety.

Wellbeing research throughout Australia has consistently shown that individuals living in regional areas are more likely to experience depression and suicide when compared to metropolitan areas; however, the difference in the experiences of anxiety based on location is not well validated in research to date. Therefore, the difference in anxiety symptoms between employees in metropolitan and regional locations shown by the *Victoria Police Mental Health and Wellbeing Study* is an important finding that requires further investigation to identify contributing factors and to ensure future interventions are appropriately designed.

### 3. High trauma exposure for employees

A high percentage (80.2%) of Victoria Police employees reported exposure to traumatic events which is greater than the general community (estimated between 50-75%). However, 8.9% of participants reported receiving a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at some point in their life which is within the lifetime rates of the general community (5-10%). This is despite Victoria Police employees being more likely to have experienced a potentially traumatic event. This suggests that there are protective factors reducing the ratio of individuals who experience a traumatic event developing PTSD.

Nevertheless, 16% of participants met symptom criteria for PTSD indicating that this will still be a priority area of intervention due to the proportion of employees experiencing the symptoms of PTSD.



### 4. Higher levels of alcohol use within moderate or high risk hazardous drinking

A total of 90% of participants reported drinking alcohol. 30% of those participants were rated as having a moderate or high risk of hazardous drinking. According to a standardised measure of alcohol use, 4.7% of participants who reported drinking alcohol were flagged as likely to be alcohol dependent. This is above the community norm rates of 3%.

The majority of respondents who flagged as having hazardous, harmful, or likely dependent drinking behaviours did not report a diagnosis of alcohol or drug dependence. This indicates that many respondents showing dangerous alcohol levels have not sought treatment from a medical practitioner or health professional.

### 5. Suicide

There were a number of employee groups who reported more frequent and serious thoughts about taking their own life. The Mental Health Program Office and Wellbeing Services will be working with these 'at risk' groups directly to determine how best to provide support for these areas.

Overall, Victoria Police employees reported higher rates of suicidal ideation (thoughts of suicide) and suicidal planning than the general community. The community prevalence of making a plan to take one's own life in the past 12 months was 0.4% as compared to 1.7% in the current study. Suicide attempts were not reported to be higher than those of the general community. This suggests suicide ideation is not translating to suicidal behaviour for respondents, which implies the presence of some protective factors.

There is no acceptable rate of suicide at Victoria Police. This is a priority area for intervention.

### 6. Life stressors

The most common personal life stressors reported by participants were ill health (their own or that of a significant other), family conflict, and the death of a loved one. Results showed that employees were impacted 'moderately' to 'extremely' by these personal life stressors.



## 7. Help seeking and barriers to care

The majority of participants who reported experiencing a mental health condition also reported receiving help for their condition. However, the results show that a large proportion of respondents experience symptoms of mental ill health without diagnosis, and that fewer than 50% of these had sought help in the last 12 months.

The largest barrier to care was that respondents prefer to manage problems themselves (61% of participants). In addition, 30% of participants reported mistrust in Victoria Police internal Wellbeing Services. This is a barrier to seeking help.

Stigma remains an issue to address as 40% of respondents reported that it would 'harm their career' to experience a mental health condition and 38% reported feeling that 'people would treat them differently'.



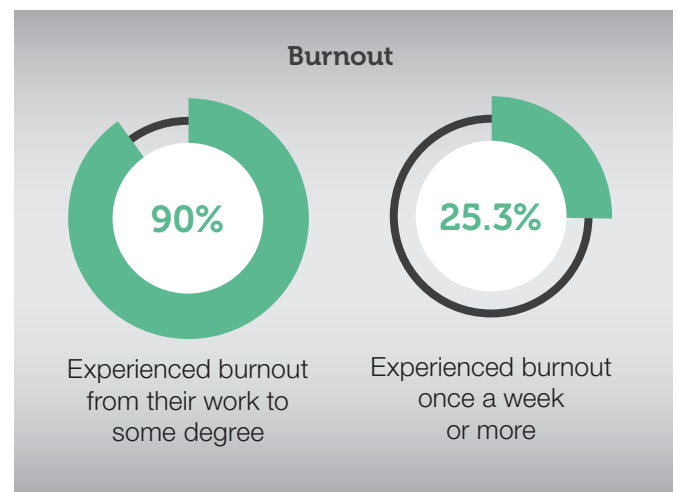
## 8. Protective factors

68.8% of respondents felt positive about the work that they do and 59.5% reported feeling a sense of value and meaning from their work.

60.6% reported that overall they are satisfied with their job.

## 9. Burnout

Almost 90% of respondents reported experiencing burnout from their work to some degree. 25.3% reported feeling burnout once a week or more.



# What we're doing

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The *2017 Victoria Police Mental Health and Wellbeing Study* was the first recommendation of the *2016 Mental Health Review* and is an essential component of the *Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2017-2020*.

The analyses presented in this report provide a better understanding of the prevalence and severity of mental health and wellbeing issues within Victoria Police. The data suggests that mental health conditions affect a large proportion of employees and have a negative impact on their work and social lives. The data has provided information to enable the identification of high-risk employee groups and can enable targeting of supports and services to address mental health conditions. It will also allow for the future evaluation of interventions developed to address the issues highlighted in the report.

Work has already commenced to address the key findings highlighted in this report, namely:

- Results have already been incorporated in the development of an updated Foundation Training package for recruits, which focuses on increasing awareness of signs and symptoms of mental health changes in both self and others, the signs of trauma, depression, and strategies for coping and self-care. Targeted mental health literacy training is also in development for other work units and employee groups.
- A general mental health literacy package, which includes a focus on suicide awareness and prevention, is under development and will be trialed in rural areas and in the particular cohorts identified to be at high risk. This package will then be available across the organisation to ensure a foundational level of mental health literacy for all employees.
- An externally hosted Wellbeing Website is currently under development. It will include information about mental health and wellbeing issues identified by the Prevalence Study and interventions tailored for police employees, former employees, and their families. The website will also provide self-guided psycho-education options for those who prefer to manage any mental health concerns themselves.

- A Trauma Recovery and Resilience Group (Group) was piloted with Victoria Police employees in 2016/2017. The group included participants who had identified changes to their mental health as a result of exposure to traumatic events but had not received a diagnosis of PTSD. The group followed evidence-based trauma treatment approaches. Outcomes from group participation included a reduction in trauma symptoms, improvement in psychological health, and improvement in coping behaviours. The group will be delivered twice per year.
- E-treatment (i.e. psychological intervention conducted over the phone or through Skype) has been included as part of the new Employee Assistance Program to provide better access to psychological service for employees in regional areas. Employees will be able to self-refer to this service.

The Mental Health Program Office is currently developing work plans to provide a range of responses to the findings. Some individual work areas will need targeted support.

The Prevalence Study is also an intervention in itself as it gives individuals and work groups an opportunity for further education and engagement with the issue of mental health and wellbeing. All employees are encouraged to read this report and consider its application within their work environment.

For any further information please contact the Mental Health Program Office at [mental-health-program-office@police.vic.gov.au](mailto:mental-health-program-office@police.vic.gov.au).

# Acknowledgements

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Thank you to all Victoria Police employees who participated in the *2017 Victoria Police Mental Health and Wellbeing Study*. This study was made possible by employee participation and the support of Victoria Police leadership, in particular Graham Ashton, Chief Commissioner.

This study was a collaboration between Monash University Accident Research Centre, The Social Research Centre and the Victoria Police Mental Health Program Office.

The full report was prepared for Victoria Police by Dr Carlyn Muir, Dr Shannon Gray, and Professor Alex Collie. This summary was prepared by the Mental Health Program Office.

### Acknowledgement of traditional owners

Victoria Police pay our respect to the traditional owners of lands on which we live and work.

We pay our respects to Elders and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who continue to care for their country, culture and people.

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