

## Summary of the Offshore Personnel Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey During COVID-19

In 2021, the Centre for Transformative Work Design Future of Work Institute at Curtin University and, the Psychology at Work Laboratory at the University of Western Australia undertook The *Offshore Personnel Mental Health and Wellbeing during COVID-19* survey to investigate the state of mental health and wellbeing, and workplace experiences of offshore oil and gas workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey was sponsored by the Mental Health Working Group which consists of representatives from the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA), the Offshore Alliance (Maritime Union of Australia and Australian Workers Union), and the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA). The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is also represented in the Mental Health Working Group.

The survey collected 502 responses from offshore oil and gas workers during June, July and August 2021, with findings indicating the offshore workforce was experiencing a higher level of psychological distress than the wider community.

The specific COVID-19 pandemic related mental health impacts were associated with the difficulties of traveling home and across state borders, longer rosters and the uncertainty of getting to work or home on time and not knowing if there would be a lockdown.

Other risk factors included loneliness on facilities, lack of support at work, low autonomy and unmanageable workloads, financial dependence on offshore work and separation from family.

The factors identified that support offshore oil and gas workers from worsening mental health and wellbeing included support from friends and families, support from managers, roster satisfaction, satisfaction with food quality and social options on facilities, and priority being given to mental health and wellbeing.

The outcomes of this survey add to the body of knowledge and the Mental Health Working Group offer the recommendations summarised below to the overall offshore oil and gas workforce and their employers to act upon. Monitoring of the effectiveness of the recommendations will be considered in due course.

The working group compiled this summary of the report. To view the full report, please visit the NOPSEMA website.

### **Methodology**

The survey aimed to explore three key overarching questions:

1. What is the overall state of the offshore worker mental health and wellbeing during COVID- 19?
2. How does the level of mental health and wellbeing of offshore personnel during COVID-19 compare to other groups, including FIFO workers, and the general Australian population?
3. What are core aspects of the offshore workers' experiences on and offshore that may be critical in shaping their mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19?

## Conclusion

The results of the survey demonstrate that COVID-19 has had an acute impact on the offshore oil and gas workforce. Employers need to address mental health risk factors, particularly loneliness and social connection.

The other key conclusion was the need for relational repair between workers and employers. Respondents reported breaches of trust that created tension and potential damage to the psychological contract between the workforce and employers. The health of this contract is a key factor for organisations to retain staff, foster commitment to the organisation, and create a culture supportive of mental health, physical safety, and productivity.

## Recommendations

The report has five recommendations for improving the mental health and wellbeing of the offshore workforce during the pandemic, and as the industry enters the “new normal” post-pandemic.

The recommendations were:

- 1) Facilitate support from organisation, supervisors, and between colleagues**  
 Support was a key factor identified in protecting the mental health of the offshore workforce in the survey. Support from family, friends, co-workers, and leadership was identified as important for supporting wellbeing and buffering stress.  
 It was suggested that employers could promote additional social opportunities on facilities and encourage open communication between leaders and their teams.
- 2) Provide opportunities to connect with home, and be at home**  
 Loneliness and social isolation were reported as being major impacts on mental health and wellbeing. With extended periods away from home or being unable to get home at all due to border closures, a sense of struggle, stress and uncertainty was reported by respondents. A proposed solution to these issues was offering workers preferred rosters and improving internet and phone connections to help workers better connect with their friends and families.
- 3) Consider workload, accommodation factors, and management of COVID-19 protocols**  
 The management of workload, as well as COVID-19 protocols like self-isolation, the quality of food and accommodations at facilities, interstate travel, and flight availabilities, were identified as impacting on offshore worker mental health and wellbeing.  
 It was recommended that employers work with their workforce to effectively manage workloads and create stability and certainty around the implementation of COVID-19 protocols. Improving social offerings on facilities was also identified as a possible solution.
- 4) Communicate decisions with transparency**  
 The survey identified clear issues with communication between leadership and the workforce, contributing to a loss of trust among the workforce. Improving communication and transparency around decision making was a key finding.
- 5) Engage workers in decision-making processes**  
 Similarly to Recommendation 4, increasing worker engagement in the decision-making process was recommended. Survey respondents reported not being consulted on changes which contributed to disengagement among the workforce. This was highlighted as a critical issue currently impacting the offshore workforce. Actively engaging with the workforce and considering and implementing their input and feedback was an important part of improving engagement and wellbeing of the offshore workforce.