



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# **Death at work: Improving support for families**

## **Survey of family members: Summary report**

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November 2015

# Research overview and aims

Workplace death exacts an enormous economic, social and personal toll for employers, workers and the national economy (Australian Safety and Compensation Council, 2009). Unfortunately, little is known about the consequences for those who are most affected – surviving families (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2008). The limited evidence available suggests that families of workers who die at work experience serious and enduring health and financial ramifications, and that these effects can extend beyond families to friends (Matthews, Bohle, Quinlan, & Rawlings-Way, 2011). Surprisingly, few studies on workplace death have specifically examined the impact on families. Furthermore, no published evidence is available on the adequacy of institutional responses in meeting the support needs of surviving families.

This research project aims to address these information gaps. Findings will provide an unprecedented evidence base for improvements in the provision of support to families. It will also aid employers, unions, and other authorities to develop practices and support material so they can better respond to workplace death and to surviving families. The following is a summary of the initial findings obtained from a survey of the family members of victims of workplace death.

## Profile of Respondents

There have been 184 valid responses to the survey to date. The majority of respondents were female (88%). Most participants (92%) were either partners or immediate family of the person who died. Over half (61%) stated that they were next of kin. Just over half of the participants were Australian (61%) with 17% from Canada and 16% from the USA. There were also small numbers from the UK, New Zealand and Singapore.

In terms of Australian participants, the highest proportion of work-related deaths occurred in Queensland (25%). The next largest group occurred in South Australia (20%), followed by Victoria (18%), NSW (17%), WA (12%), Tasmania (7%) and the ACT (2%). Approximately 15% of survey respondents lived in different states to those in which the deaths occurred, at the time of the death.

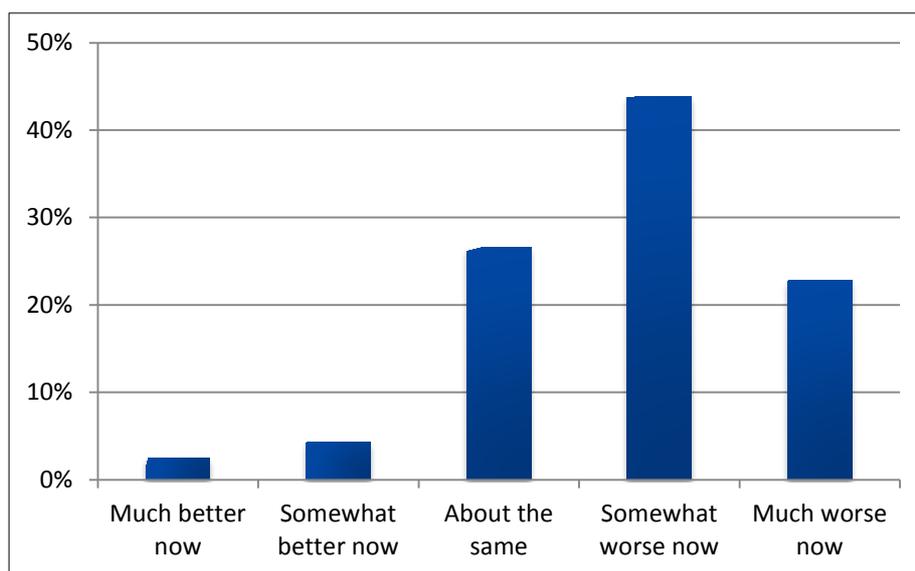
## Profile of the Victims

Approximately 88% of the workplace deaths reported in the survey occurred after the year 2000. The majority of family members who died at work were male (93%) and a significant proportion (34%) worked in construction. Approximately three quarters (75%) were permanently employed and most (95%) worked more than 35 hours per week. Some (7%) died travelling to or from work. Approximately 80% of the reported Australian workplace deaths occurred in Queensland, South Australia, NSW or Victoria. The highest concentration of workplace deaths reported in the survey occurring outside Australia was in Ontario, Canada.

# Health Effects of Workplace Death on Family Members

Preliminary findings indicate that the emotional and physical health of respondents has been substantially affected by the sudden death of their loved one. When asked about their health, more than 70% of respondents rated it as good. However, when asked to compare, 67% stated that their current health was worse than prior the death of their loved one (See Figure 1). When asked about satisfaction with their life and personal circumstances, only 7% of respondents reported being *'very satisfied'*.

**Figure 1.** Health now compared to before death of loved one

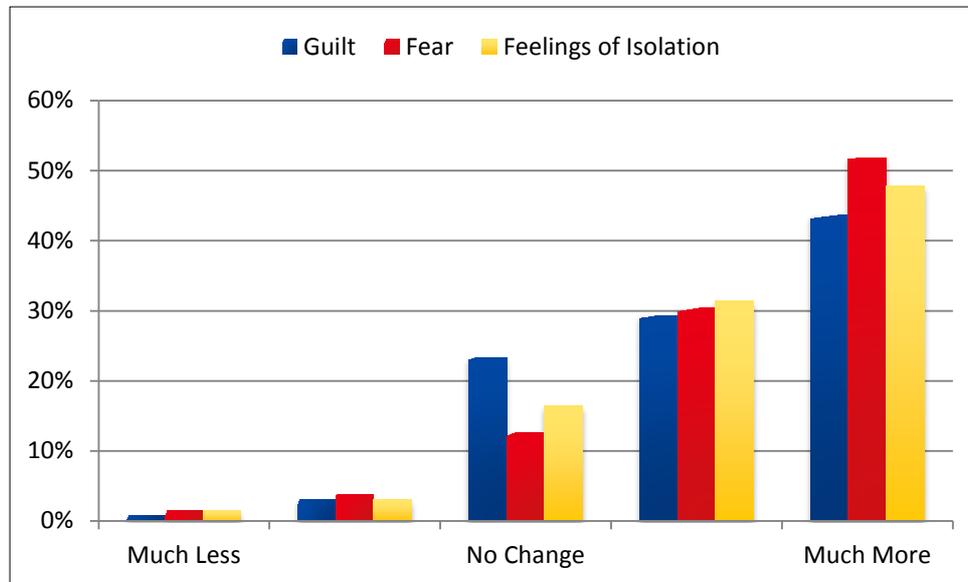


In terms of coping with the death of their loved one, roughly 65% of respondents reported that they were *'just managing'*, or faring worse. Approximately 35% reported that they were coping *'well'*. Respondents who answered items regarding ways of coping (~150) reported using problem focused coping (e.g. talked with a professional about the situation) more frequently than emotion focused coping (e.g. kept my feelings to myself). *'Talking to a relative or a friend'* and *'taking things one step at a time'*, were the coping approaches used most frequently.

More than two thirds (69%) of respondents reported that in the last month, personal or emotional problems had kept them from doing daily activities at least to some degree. Approximately 65% of respondents reported that in the last month, their physical health had allowed them to accomplish less than they would like, at least *'some of the time'*. Approximately 32% reported that in the last month, emotional problems (e.g. depression or anxiety) had led them to accomplish less than they would like, *'most of the time'* or *'all of the time'*.

When providing information about their bereavement, more than 75% of respondents reported increased levels of guilt, fear, and feelings of isolation since the death (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Changes experienced since the death of loved one**



The personal challenges associated with traumatic bereavement were evident in responses. Of the approximately 150 respondents who answered questions relating to mental health, more than 40% were likely to meet criteria for prolonged grief disorder (PGD) and depression at the time of survey completion, while 60% were likely to meet criteria for PTSD. Approximately 40% reported they had been diagnosed with depression, 30% with PTSD, and 30% with an anxiety disorder following the death.

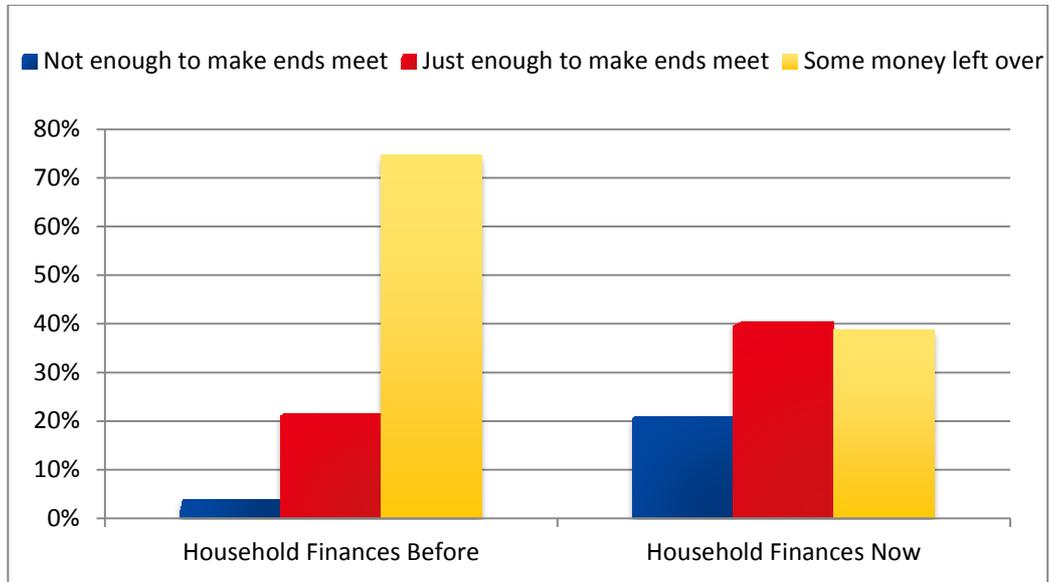
For some, the challenge led to an appreciation of personal strength and wisdom. Almost 60% of respondents reported experiencing at least a moderate degree of personal growth from the traumatic loss they experienced. More specifically, 64% reported that they had changed priorities regarding what was important in life and 32% reported having a greater appreciation for the value of their own life, *'to a very great degree'*.

## Impact on Family and Lifestyle

For most, the workplace death had a significant impact on family and lifestyle. Many respondents reported that they moved house (33%), changed jobs (29%), increased their debt (25%), became the primary income earner (22%) and returned to work (22%) following the death. Respondents with children (85%) reported significant changes in their children's behaviour. The most commonly reported changes were ongoing concerns about the safety of other family members (45%), angry outbursts (36%), and being anxious (34%).

In terms of the financial impact of workplace death, 63% of respondents reported struggling to make ends meet following the death of their loved one (See Figure 3). This was in comparison to only 25% who were struggling prior to the death. This finding highlights the fact that not only are family members dealing with the emotional impact of grief and loss they also have to contend with considerable financial hardship as a result of the death.

**Figure 3. Household Finances at the End of a Month - Before and After the Death**



## Dealings with Authorities

More than 60% of respondents were notified of their loved one's death by the police or a family member. Most (88%) respondents were notified within a day that their loved one had died. However more than a quarter (26%) of respondents were not informed within a day of how they had died.

Tragically, 61% of respondents were told by an authority at some point, that the death was preventable. In terms of recommendations for prevention of similar incidents in the future, just 51% of respondents were told that recommendations were made. Of these, only 32% reported being satisfied with the recommendations.

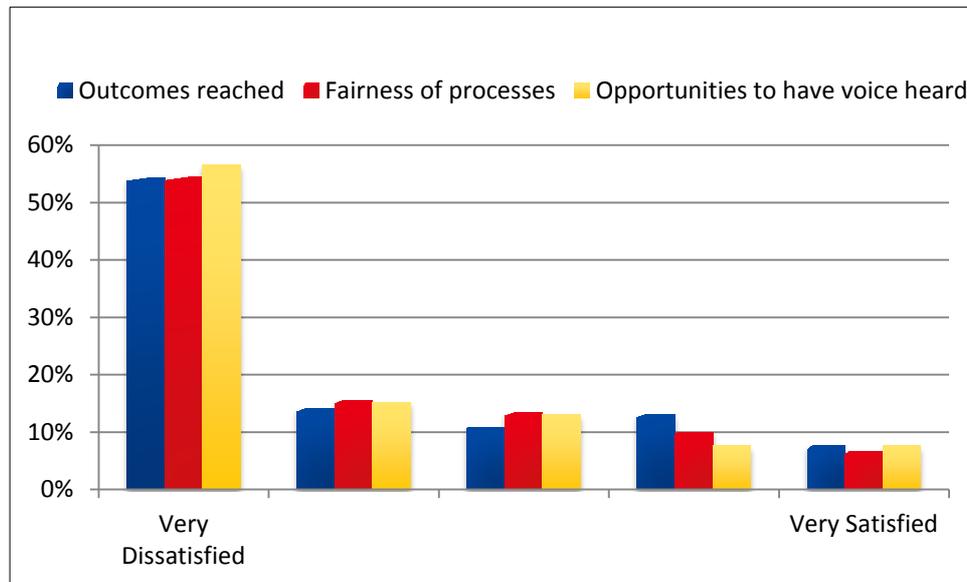
When asked about the extent to which they had ability to control or influence decisions following the workplace death, roughly 60% of respondents answered 'not at all'. With regard to any investigation, almost half of respondents (>47%) indicated that they were 'very dissatisfied' with the outcomes reached, the fairness of processes used, and the opportunities they had to have their voice heard.

In regard to court proceedings, a similar proportion (>48%) also reported being 'very dissatisfied' with the outcomes reached, the fairness of processes used and the opportunities to have their voice heard (Figure 4). Almost two thirds (62%) of respondents indicated that they were not given an opportunity to express their views on whether a coronial inquest or hearing should be held. When asked about their satisfaction with outcomes related to the investigation and court processes, respondents were least satisfied with those related to the prosecution and damages and most satisfied with those related to the coroner's investigation.

A significant proportion of respondents reported that the time to hold and complete the formal processes following the death impacted the intensity of their grief reactions

(71%), the duration of their grief reactions (75%), and their ability to begin to adapt to life without their loved one (70%).

**Figure 4. Satisfaction with Court Proceedings**



Few respondents believed that justice had been done following the investigation and court processes, with 67% and 63% respectively reporting that justice was done ‘to a small extent’.

## Support – Formal and Informal

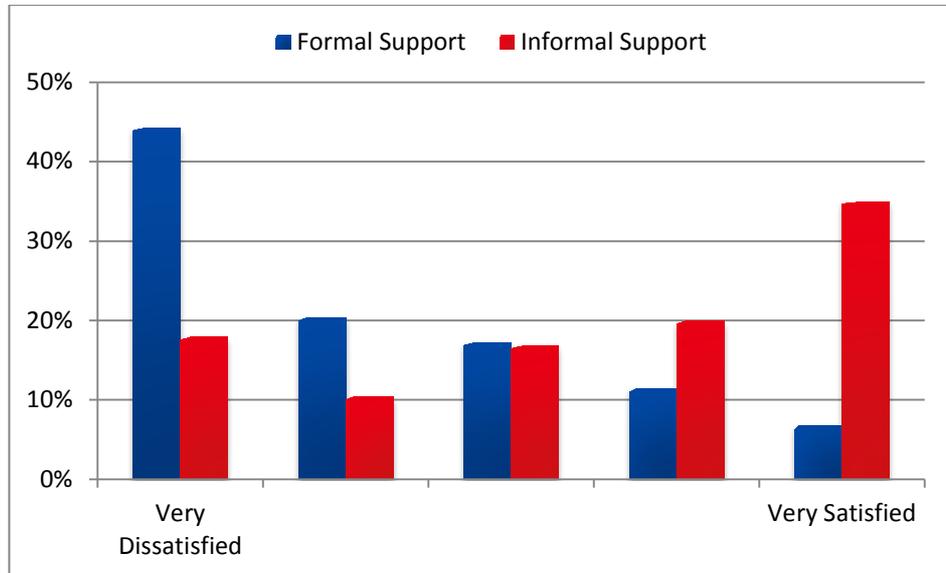
Types of support measured in the survey included overall support, information received, emotional support, and financial support. Considering all types of informal sources of support (e.g. own networks and support groups/services) and all types of formal sources of support (e.g. authorities, formal services), respondents were generally satisfied with the informal support received and dissatisfied with formal support (See Figure 5).

In terms of formal support, more than 60% of respondents were dissatisfied with support received from the authorities (associated with the investigation and court processes) and with the financial support received from workers’ compensation.

In terms of informal support, more than half (>50%) of respondents were satisfied with the support received from their own networks and approximately 70% were satisfied with the support received from support groups and services.

Less than 25% of respondents stated that they had someone to help them navigate the formal processes following the death of their loved one. Of these, more than 80% reported that this person helped them to understand what to expect.

**Figure 5: Satisfaction with Formal and Informal Support**



## Concluding comments

These interim results point to the many areas where families would benefit from sensitive and tailored support following a traumatic workplace death. However further analysis is needed, and additional survey responses would strengthen the analysis. While we are now in the next phase of the study and are talking directly with families about their experiences following a workplace tragedy, the survey remains open and is available for families to continue to have their voice heard. If you know of anyone who would like to complete the survey, please let them know it is still available and we would welcome their response. Thank you.

### ***Death at Work: Improving Support for Families***

For information about the study:

<http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/research/workplace-death/>

To participate in the survey, go to:

[www.surveymonkey.com/s/workplacedeathstudy](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/workplacedeathstudy)

Follow us on Facebook:

[www.facebook.com/WorkplaceDeathStudy](http://www.facebook.com/WorkplaceDeathStudy)

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