

Supporting Equitable, Diverse, and Inclusive Psychosocial Health and Resilience of First Responders in Alberta, Canada



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Introduction

- Firefighters face higher rates of mental health struggles than the general population, yet support access remains inconsistent (Henderson et al., 2016).
- The hypermasculine culture and systemic barriers often hinder open discussions about mental health in the fire service (Hom et al., 2017).
- Despite increased awareness, gaps persist in culturally competent support for firefighters from diverse backgrounds.
- Using an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)-informed approach, this research aims to improve psychosocial well-being in firefighting communities.



Research Goal and Objectives

This study aims to improve the psychosocial health and resilience of firefighters by strengthening EDI and social supports.

The **objectives are**:

- 1) To document and describe the role of informal and formal social supports from the perspectives of firefighters.
- 2) To understand how intersecting identities affect firefighters' experiences and perceptions of social supports in building resilience.
- 3) To assess and collaboratively develop resources that advance EDI and social supports to build firefighters' resilience.



Methodology

The study utilized a mixed method approach to address the research objectives:

Data Collection:

- **Phase I:** An online self-administered survey was conducted in Alberta using Qualtrics, to gather quantitative data on firefighters' perceptions of social support and EDI challenges.
- **Phase II:** Individual interviews were conducted with firefighters focusing on their experiences with formal and informal support networks, resilience, and systemic barriers.

Study Participants: Participants included career, paid-on call, volunteer and seasonal firefighters, along with key stakeholders involved in firefighters' mental health and training.

Data Analysis:

- **Quantitative survey data** were analyzed using SPSS software to identify trends, patterns, and statistical relationships in firefighters' support experiences.
- **Qualitative interview data** were coded and analyzed using NVivo 14, applying thematic analysis to explore key narratives on resilience, social support, and EDI-related challenges.

Conceptual Considerations

- This research is grounded in psychosocial resilience, social support, and EDI in relation to firefighters' mental health and well-being.
- An eco-psychosocial lens highlights how firefighters' experiences are shaped by social networks, professional culture, and systemic factors such as workplace policies and access to support (Henderson et al., 2016).
- This study acknowledges the social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence firefighters' mental health and resilience (Harandi et al., 2017).
- By adopting an equity-based and resilience-centered approach, this research promotes a holistic and sustainable framework for improving firefighters' psychosocial well-being.

Survey Findings

Table 1: Informal social support: order of importance

Sources of informal social support	High	Medium	Low	Total
Spouse or partner	72	7	8	87
Friends	55	29	3	
Your parent(s)	33	35	19	
Your child(ren)	25	34	28	
Mentor	24	52	11	
Pet	23	37	27	
Sibling(s)	12	51	24	
Community members	8	46	43	
Neighbours	4	45	38	

Table 2: Formal social support: order of importance

Sources of formal supports	High	Medium	Low	Total
Co-worker(s) who are trained in peer support	72	10	1	83
Fire station captain	55	21	7	
Fire station manager	41	32	10	
Supports through employee assistance program (EAP) (e.g., professional counselling, psychologist)	29	30	24	
Resilient Minds, Canadian Mental Health Agency	18	46	19	
Religious group(s)	12	29	18	
OSI-CAN Alberta	5	41	37	
International Association of Firefighters (IAFF)	3	19	61	
Alberta Professional Fire Fighters and Paramedics Association (APFFPA)	1	21	61	

Table 3: Impact of diversity from gender perspective

Do you think diversity has had an impact on you or your career?	Female	Male	Total
	Yes	14.0 (66.7%)	20.0 (40.8%)
No	7.0 (33.3%)	29.0 (59.2%)	36.0 (51.4%)

Table 4: Impact of diversity from race/ethnicity perspective

Do you think diversity has had an impact on you or your career?	Race/ethnicity			
	Black	Asian	White/Caucasian	Indigenous (First Nations, Metis, or Inuit)
Yes	2 (50%)	0 (0.0%)	29 (50.88%)	1 (50%)
No	2 (50%)	2 (100.0%)	28 (49.12%)	1 (50%)

Key Findings from Interviews and Survey

The importance of social support for firefighters' resilience

Participants emphasized the importance of informal and formal social supports to foster their resilience. Informal social supports, from colleagues, family, and friends, play a key role. Still, many respondents noted that those outside the profession often struggle to understand the unique challenges of the job.

I think informal social supports are important for my mental health and resilience.

Lack of understanding of my situation. It's like they are cheering me on but have never been to a game.

Barriers would be that they don't fully understand the situation and have their own thoughts of the situation instead of just listening and being there.

The role of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in firefighters' well-being

Diversity-related challenges were consistently reported, particularly by women and firefighters from racialized communities. Participants described gendered stereotypes, workplace exclusion, and a lack of representation in leadership roles. The hypermasculine culture of firefighting was seen as a barrier to open conversations about mental health and emotional well-being.

As a female firefighter, it has been important for me to not rely on primarily fire service supports as it is difficult for a white, male firefighter (97% of the fire service) to understand the experiences of a minority firefighter.

Make our workplace safer for women. There is still so much sexual harassment and misogyny that few women stick around long enough to be champions or mentors to help promote the job to newcomers.

Barriers to accessing mental health support

Participants reported significant challenges in accessing formal mental health support, such as financial barriers (cost of therapy), limited culturally competent services, stigma within fire service culture, and geographic disparities in mental health resources for rural firefighters.

In order to afford therapy, I have had to change my lifestyle dramatically.

EAP is not culturally competent, some professional counsellors/psychologists are not culturally competent. It is difficult to find and vet culturally competent mental health practitioners.

Addressing Gaps in Training and Resources

While the Resilient Minds (RM) training program was generally viewed as beneficial, participants noted that it lacks strong EDI integration. Some firefighters resisted the idea of expanding EDI-related training, while others emphasized the need for broader representation in firefighter mental health initiatives.

The RM program instructor manual included only one image of a non-white firefighter and one image of female firefighters. It is difficult not to think of the representation as an afterthought.

Absolutely NOT. More EDI will cause the RM program to DIE. This is a program written for firefighters by firefighters.

Conclusion and Implications

The preliminary findings highlight the critical role of social support, ongoing challenges in mental health accessibility, and the impact of systemic barriers on diverse firefighters. Addressing these gaps requires targeted interventions, including:

- Expanding EDI-informed peer support programs.
- Improving culturally competent mental health resources.
- Strengthening accessibility and affordability of mental health services.
- Enhancing leadership accountability in fostering inclusive fire service environments.
- Future research and program development should focus on sustainable, inclusive, and community-driven approaches to firefighters' well-being.

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