Unions NSW

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Overworked, overloaded, overlooked and preparing to leave

2022 SURVEY OF NSW PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS

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Introduction

The heroes of the COVID-19 Pandemic were our essential workers.

It was nurses, paramedics, doctors and everyone who works in our health care system.

It was our emergency services workers.

Our teachers, educators and support staff at every level.

It was our shop assistants, delivery workers, cleaners and carers.

It was our contact tracers and public servants – everyone who kept NSW functioning.

This report reflects the experiences of a section of this workforce; those who worked for the NSW Public Service during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of these workers continued going into work, putting themselves and their families at greater risk of COVID-19, while experiencing increased workloads and a public sector wide pay freeze.

For the past two years, politicians at every level stood with these workers for photo opportunities. Now many feel they have been abandoned as new challenges arise post-lockdowns.

This report finds that public sector workers are experiencing real wage cuts, staff shortages and overwork. They are tired and fed up with their employer, the NSW Government. As one survey respondent told us they have been “overworked, overloaded and now overlooked”.

An alarming proportion are now explicitly thinking about leaving the NSW Public Sector; moving to the private sector, moving interstate or changing career altogether.

This report reveals the extent of the problems faced by these workers and outlines the key findings which should be of grave concern to our NSW political leaders.

Key Findings

1. NSW Public Sector workers are facing a cost of living crisis as their wages fail to keep up with inflation.

2. Understaffing and unreasonable workloads are putting immense pressure on public sector workers and, in turn, public services.

3. The NSW Government's response to these twin-crises has been to continue capping wages below inflation, increase casual and contract employment, and pressure workers to perform more unpaid overtime.

4. Workers feel the quality of public services they provide is deteriorating as result of NSW Government policies.

5. Essential workers are considering leaving the public sector or moving interstate.

Methodology

'Overworked, Overloaded and Overlooked and Preparing to Leave' is a report summarising the results of an online survey of NSW Public Sector Workers from 24 August to 14 September.

The survey consisted of 20 questions covering:

- workload and staffing;
- job security;
- wages;
- cost of living; and
- service delivery.

The questions were designed to provide quantitative and qualitative data from respondents.

The survey was hosted on a third-party survey platform which prevented singular IP addresses from filling out the survey multiple times.

The survey was distributed to union and non-union members in the NSW public sector through email and public social media pages and provided to unions with coverage of the NSW Public Sector for distribution in workplaces.

Respondents who are not currently employed in the NSW Public Sector were excluded from the survey.

In total the survey received 2893 responses.

The results and findings in this report are consistent with other research into the public sector. This suggests the findings published here are reasonably robust.

WAGES CAPPED BELOW THE COST OF LIVING

Finding 1: NSW Public Sector workers are facing a cost-of-living crisis as their wages fail to keep up with inflation.

NSW Public Sector workers, alongside many households in the state, are facing a cost-of-living crisis. The Federal Treasurer's Ministerial Statement on the Economy predicts inflation to peak at 7.75% by the 2022 December quarter[1].

The impact of the crisis on public sector workers is exacerbated by the NSW Government's decision in the 2022 NSW Budget to cap wages growth significantly below the growth in prices of goods and services. The NSW Public Sector wage cap prevents the public sector workforce from receiving pay increases above 3 per cent this financial year.

This resulted in a significant and deep real wage cut for workers. Of the 2331 workers surveyed more than nine in ten (93 per cent) indicated that their wages have not kept up with the cost of living over the past five years.

This finding is consistent with research by Professor Emeritus David Peetz which found the average NSW public sector workers will experience a real wage cut over $2000 this financial year:

Occupation[i]	wage shortfall 22-23 ($)
Bus driver: Senior Bus Operator	1820.2704
Prison officer : Correctional Officer 2nd year	2115.62104
Nurse: Registered Nurse/Midwife Year 4	2368.5116
Paramedic: Paramedic Year 2 (Division 2 (iii)	2402.6054
Firefighter: Qualified Firefighter	2642.48712
Median public sector employee	2802.2202
Teacher: Teacher Band 2.1 Salary	2992.46844
Police officer: Senior Constable Level 3 Step 1	3129.1338

1. https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/speeches/ministerial-statement-economy

- 93% DON'T BELIEVE THEIR SALARY HAS KEPT UP WITH THE COST OF LIVING OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS.

Respondent Quotes:

"Feel cheated that we were classified essential during Covid, fires, floods because it suited them but now we want a decent pay rise we are not so essential so it seems"

"More work, no increases in salary. Less staff working. Pressured to do more by management with little or no recognition of extra work done"

"Covid19 added significantly to an already understaffed, underpaid and difficult job. The pandemic added to the workload, exacerbated the housing difficulties we were already facing and limited our options for travel, rent, income as well as increasing workload and living costs"

UNDERSTAFFING IN THE NSW PUBLIC SECTOR

Finding 2: Understaffing and unreasonable workloads are putting immense pressure on public sector workers and services.

NSW Public Sector workers are reporting chronic understaffing and unreasonable workloads. This puts significant pressure on workers capacity to deliver high quality public services.

Almost three quarters of respondents (73 per cent) reported unfilled roles in their workplace or team. Further, 60 per cent say that even if current vacancies were filled, staffing levels would still be insufficient to ensure a reasonable workload and the delivery of high-quality public services.

This increased workload does not appear to have subsided in recent months, particularly for those working in the health and education clusters.

The combination of increasing workloads and short staffing is resulting in significant mental health impacts, as respondents routinely report this in open-ended response questions. More than 250 written responses mentioned anxiety, depression or PTSD explicitly – just under 13% of all written responses.

- 73% REPORT UNFILLED ROLES IN THEIR WORKPLACE OR TEAM.
- 60% BELIEVE IF ALL CURRENT VACANCIES WERE FILLED, STAFFING LEVELS WOULD STILL BE INSUFFICIENT TO ENSURE REASONABLE WORKLOAD AND THE PROVISION OF QUALITY PUBLIC SERVICES
- 2 YEARS AND 10 MONTHS IS THE AVERAGE TIME SINCE THEIR TEAM HAD ALL VACANCIES FILLED

Respondent Quotes:

"I was the only Doctor covering hospitals/sites where normally there should be 2 to 3 doctors. This was completely unsafe and due to the stinginess of NSW Health and terrible planning by medical admin this was allowed to occur at the expense of patient care."

"My workload increased astronomically. I was working 7 days a week, up to 12 hours a day. Although we are no longer online, the workload still significantly increased as our students are still affected but I am required to adapt to new policies which do not consider the impact of the pandemic on our kids. How do I successfully teach a concept to students still in the middle of significant trauma? As a result, my own well-being and mental health have also suffered. I have had to seek out medical help and am now medicated to deal with my own mental health issues as a result."

THE FAILING NSW GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Finding 3: The NSW Government's response to these twin-crises has been to continue capping wages below inflation, increase casual and contract employment, and pressure workers to perform more unpaid overtime.

The NSW Government has responded to cost-of-living pressures and short-staffing by maintaining a public sector pay cap below inflation in the 2022 NSW Budget, using casual and contract labour to provide stop-gap solutions and increasing unpaid overtime to cover shortfalls in service delivery.

Where the NSW Government has responded to the staffing crisis, it has opted to use short-term and casual employment. About half (51 per cent) of respondents reported that their employer had replaced a permanent employment role with a casual or contracting role.

Three quarters of survey respondents reported that they currently do additional hours of uncompensated overtime. About half (51 per cent) have felt pressured in their workplace to do unpaid overtime in the past two years.

More than 50 per cent of respondents reported working at least a full-day worth of unpaid overtime in a week, and more than 1 in 5 working more than two days extra a week in unpaid overtime.

Coupled with falling real wages, our results indicate public sector workers are working longer hours for less remuneration. As will be explored in the next section of this report, this places greater stress on worker's ability to provide high quality public services.

- 75% CURRENTLY DO UNPAID/UNCOMPENSATED ADDITIONAL HOURS OF OVERTIME
- 51% HAVE FELT PRESSURED BY THEIR MANAGER, EMPLOYER OR WORKPLACE CONDITIONS TO DO UNPAID OVERTIME IN THE PAST TWO YEARS
- 51% HAVE AN EMPLOYER WHO REPLACED A PERMANENT ROLE WITH A CASUAL OR CONTRACT ROLE

Respondent Quotes:

"Significant workload increase due to sick leave. Staffing in hospitals has been terrible. Leading to large hours of overtime required from staff and less time healthcare workers are able to provide to patients. This has also lead to bed blocks as patient are delayed in discharge due to lack of staff."

"I got up between 3 and 4 AM each morning during the lockdowns to create digital lessons. I stayed online during school hours to administer and aid students in these lessons, whilst also helping my two school age children. It was the most difficult period of employment in my life. I deserve more than thanks."

We have become even more overworked. We are now expected to provide everything we provided during COVID as well as what we provided prior to COVID. Our workload has increased substantially with no flexibility due to staff shortages."

"We now struggled to get casual teachers. So when teachers are away, we miss out on important planning time. This has been going on since Covid and is starting to become a real issue with the staffing morale and sense of worth. A lot of teachers are sick of the teacher shortages and WE NEED A PAY RISE."

OUR PUBLIC SERVICES ARE DETERIORATING

Finding 4: Workers feel the quality of public services they provide is deteriorating as result of NSW Government policies.

Public sector workers are aware and concerned that aforementioned issues are affecting the quality of their work and the public services they deliver. The qualitative survey responses suggest this is creating a vicious cycle. Public sector workers feel they have to overload themselves and overwork in an attempt to maintain the quality of the services they deliver. This leads to more burnout and stress, creating the cycle.

Three quarters of respondents (78 per cent) reported their working conditions have negatively affected the quality of the work the services deliver over the past two years.

These findings are consistent with other sources of research on similar issues.

The independent Gallop inquiry into the work of teachers and principals in NSW found that the NSW Government's wages cap made it impossible to fix the teacher shortages required to meet the increasing workloads expected of the state's educators[2].

There is significant evidence in the NSW context that patient outcomes are more favourable in hospitals with greater staffing levels[3].

- 78% BELIEVE THEIR WORKING CONDITIONS HAVE NEGATIVELY AFFECTED THE QUALITY OF THEIR WORK OR SERVICES THEY PROVIDE OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS

Respondent Quotes:

"Overworked, overloaded and overlooked. I am burnt out, as are all my colleagues, and students are suffering because we have so many teachers off sick. No publicity for our cause - just lies from the minister that no student is missing out. What rubbish!"

2. https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/gallop_inquiry_report_2021.pdf
3. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00768-6/fulltext

NSW ON THE BRINK OF A "GREAT RESIGNATION" FROM PUBLIC SERVICES

Finding 5: Essential workers are considering leaving the public sector, moving interstate or changing career

Perhaps the most concerning finding in this survey is the future outlook for public services in NSW.

Two-thirds of respondents reported that they were considering leaving the public sector in the next five years. This was even higher among respondents in the education and health sector, where 75 per cent and 70 per cent respectively say they are considering leaving their jobs.

More than 1 in 4 of all respondents state they have or are considering moving and working in the public sector in other states – seeking higher wages, a lower cost of living and better conditions.

This result was particularly acute for responders employed in the health (71%) and education (75%) clusters.

Over half of those considering moving interstate named Queensland as their most likely destination.

These results add weight to the common-sense proposition that pay and conditions are closely linked to retaining and attracting staff.

- 62% ARE CURRENTLY CONSIDERING LEAVING THE PUBLIC SECTOR WITHIN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS
- 27% HAVE CONSIDERED OR ARE CONSIDERING MOVING AND WORKING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR INTERSTATE
- 54% OF WORKERS THAT HAVE CONSIDERED OR ARE CONSIDERING MOVING INTERSTATE ARE THINKING ABOUT QUEENSLAND

Respondent Quotes:

"The lack of teaching staff, collapsed classes, no casuals, and constant monitoring documents, is leading to teacher burnout and teachers leaving the profession in droves."

Conclusion

Essential workers in the public sector feel the quality of the services they provide are falling.

Falling because they are expected to deal with increasing workloads with staff shortages and falling wages.

Where the Government's response is to rely on unpaid overtime and maintain a pay cap policy that delivers a real wage cuts.

The most significant argument for a change of course is the outlook for the future.

With two-thirds of public sector workers considering leading their professions, the issues of staff shortages and over-work are only going to get worse.

The people of NSW, who rely upon these services, will ultimately experience the decline in public services.