



Executive summary

Science. Compassion. Action

The Black Dog Institute is a global leader in mental health research and the only medical research institute in Australia to investigate mental health across the lifespan. We seek to inform mental health practice and policy in the areas of suicide prevention, digital health, workplace, youth mental health and in the prevention and treatment of common mental disorders.

The research presented in this white paper focuses on workplace mental health. Work in Australia has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. Technological innovation has led to wide scale digitisation of work, automation, and the gig economy. At the same time, Australia's workforce has changed, with greater female participation, an older retirement age and many more people on short term or casual contracts. Even before COVID-19, the Productivity Commission Mental Health Inquiry of 2020 found workplace mental ill-health cost Australia up to \$39 billion in lost participation and productivity.

The key question this white paper seeks to answer is what, if any, impact have these seismic changes had on the mental health of Australian workers? We investigate this question using new data from three large scale surveys, perspectives from the Business Council of Australia and from the Australian Council of Trade Unions, as well as voices of Australian workers with lived experience of mental illness. Emerging data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also considered to build the dynamic picture of Australia's workforce mental health.

The **first section** of this white paper provides a historical perspective to help define the nature of modern work. It traces the key shifts in work roles, workplaces and Australia's working population since the year 2000.

The **second section** uses data collected from more than 9000 Australian workers as part of the annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) surveys to better understand shifts in workers' lives and experiences, with a focus on work-related mental health risk factors.

We discovered that more Australian employers were taking steps to create more mentally healthy workplaces and that fewer Australians were required to work on the weekends than in the past.

However, new analysis uncovered some concerning trends. Australian workers report their jobs are now more complex and difficult than the previous decade, that they worry more, at all ages, about the long-term future of jobs, and that they have experienced a sustained reduction in their freedom to decide how to do their work.

The **third section** uses mental health and suicide data from a range of sources over the last two decades to examine what, if any, shifts have occurred in the mental health and wellbeing of Australian workers. The rates of suicide among working aged Australians have remained relatively stable. However, mental health symptoms gradually increased over the last decade, most apparent amongst younger workers, aged under 25, and in the last year exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the rate of mental health related workers' compensation claims has remained relatively stable over recent years, recovery from these injuries is taking longer. A steady increase was observed in claims relating to harassment or bullying in the workplace.

The **final section** of this white paper is a call to action for both businesses and governments in Australia to attend to our workplace mental health crisis. These actions must be supported by best available evidence.

We provide five key recommendations for businesses:

- 1 Provide managers with evidence-based mental health training to improve their recognition of and response to mental ill health and related risk factors in the workplace.
- 2 Build mentally healthy workplaces through organisational-level strategies that facilitate worker autonomy, improved job control, and flexible work.
- 3 Take immediate preventative action on workplace bullying, and sexual harassment and assault.
- 4 Implement evidence-based protective mental health and wellbeing interventions for all employees.
- 5 Account for a steady post-pandemic workplace transition.

We provide six recommendations for governments:

- 1 Strengthen protections for workers through industrial relations laws to mitigate the effects of insecure work, casualisation, and the gig economy on mental health.
- 2 Improve regulation of psychosocial risks in the workplace to promote evidence-based interventions.
- 3 Reform workers' compensation systems so that early recovery from psychological injury is promoted.
- 4 Ensure access to affordable childcare to support working parents and women.
- 5 Implement and fund the Respect@Work recommendations in full, with an emphasis on prevention.
- 6 Dedicate research funding to monitor trends in workplace mental health and the development and testing of new workplace mental health interventions.

This white paper brings together, for the first time, longitudinal data on Australian work and mental health. It shows strong trends, particularly emerging in younger workers, that need to be countered through decisive action. The COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating these changes. Australian businesses and governments need to act urgently to protect the mental health of our workers – now and for the future.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Harvey'.

Professor Sam Harvey
Acting Director and Chief Psychiatrist
Black Dog Institute