

A STUDY OF THE DETERMINANTS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE AMONG QUEBEC LAWYERS

Summary of the Study:
Highlights



Context

Since May 2015, the Barreau du Québec has been collaborating with Nathalie Cadieux, Principal Investigator and Associate Professor in the Department of Management and Human Resources Management at Université de Sherbrooke, to conduct research on the determinants of mental health in the workplace among the members of the Barreau. This research is the largest study conducted among lawyers in Quebec, with more than 2,500 participants. The survey included nearly 150 questions on three health indicators: psychological distress, burnout and well-being.

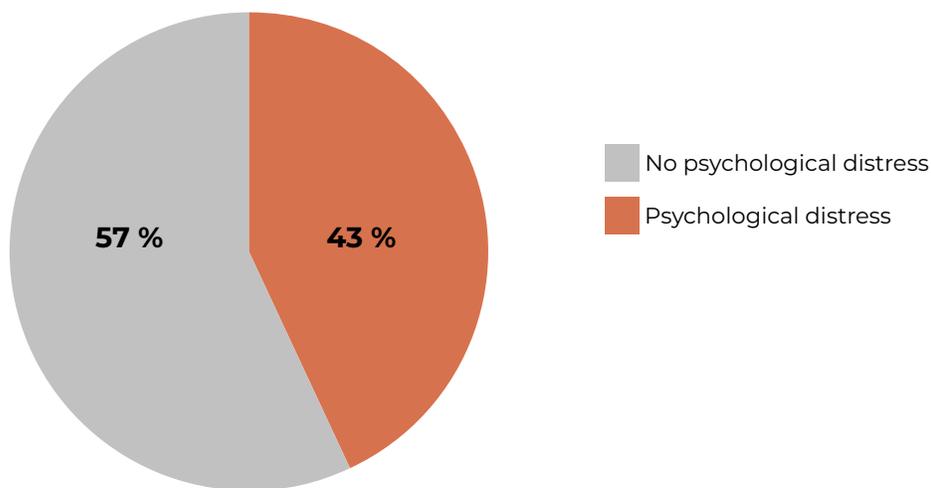
The masculine gender is used for ease of reading. It should be interpreted in its generic sense, unless otherwise indicated.

Highlights

1. Psychological distress

Psychological distress at work must be interpreted as an unpleasant subjective state that does not refer to a specific pathology, but instead is defined as a set of symptoms similar to burnout or depression, ranging from fatigue to irritability and including anxiety disorders, sleep disorders, concentration problems, etc. It does not necessarily mean that the person is ill. Distress refers to an early warning sign that emerges when individuals have difficulty adjusting to the stressors to which they are exposed.

Proportions of psychological distress vs no psychological distress among participating lawyers

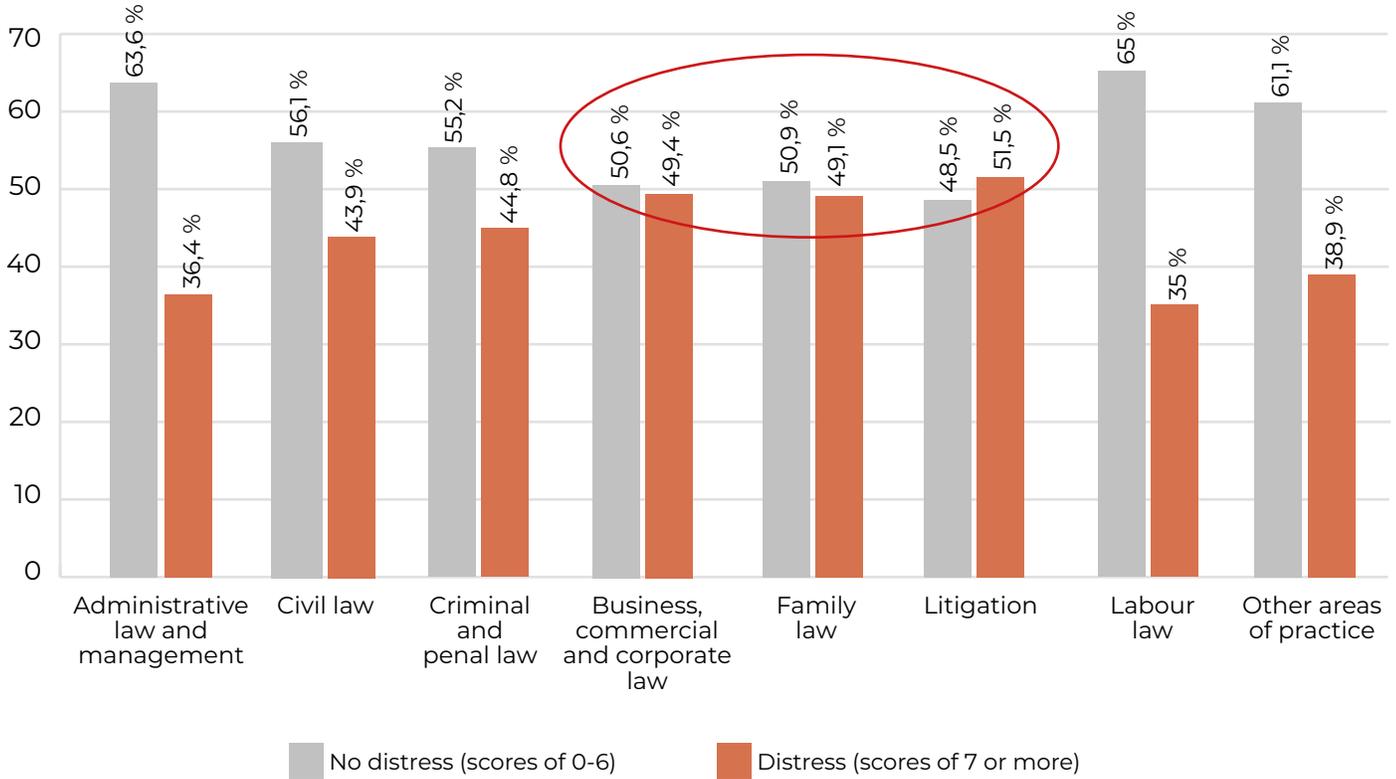


The proportion of psychological distress is higher among women (44.2%) than men (39%). However, young men are proportionally more likely to experience significant distress.

The proportion of distress is significantly higher among lawyers with ten years of practice or less (49.9%) than among more experienced lawyers (36.7%).

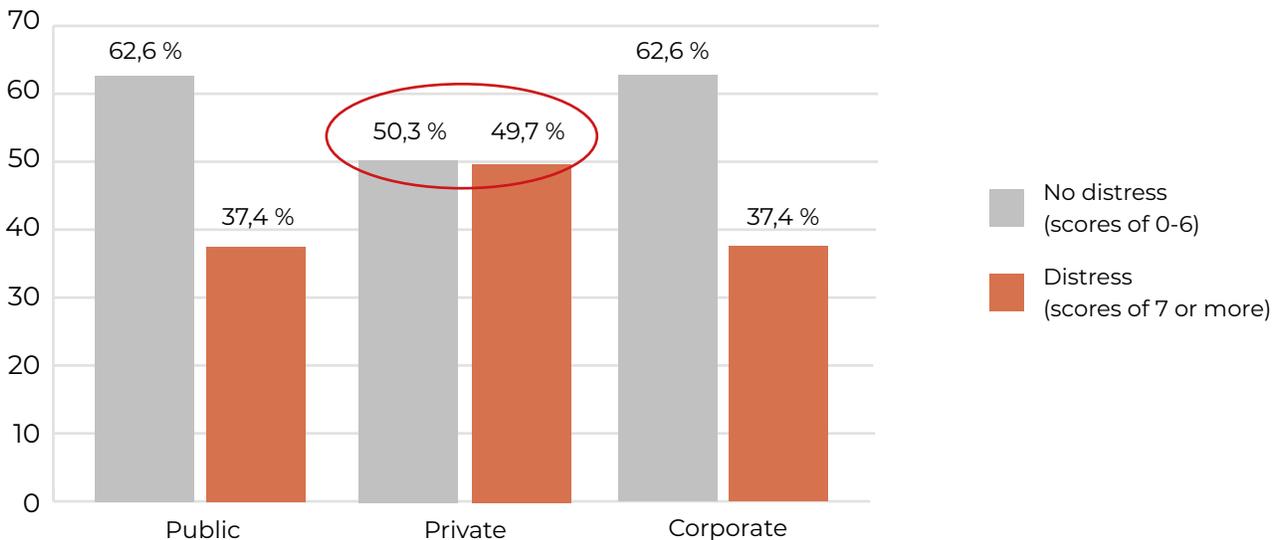
Proportions of psychological distress by area of practice

Lawyers practicing business, commercial and corporate law, family law and litigation are most exposed to psychological distress, with distress rates close to 50% for these different areas compared to other areas of practice.



Proportions of psychological distress by sector

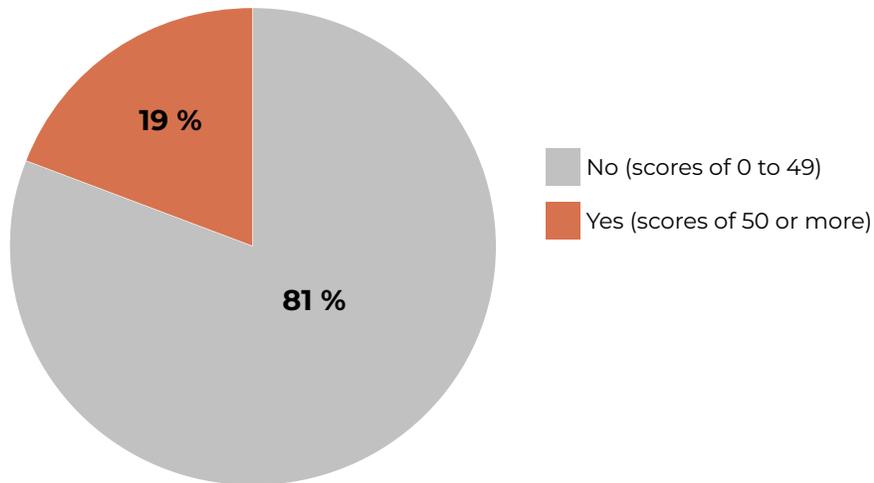
The proportion of psychological distress also appears to be higher in the private sector than in the public and corporate sectors.



2. Burnout

Burnout measured in the context of the study refers to a state of physical, emotional and mental fatigue and exhaustion resulting from the individual (personal burnout), organizational (work-related burnout) and relationship (client-related burnout) spheres. Work-related burnout predominates.

Proportion of burnout in the overall sample



Proportions of personal, work-related and client-related burnout

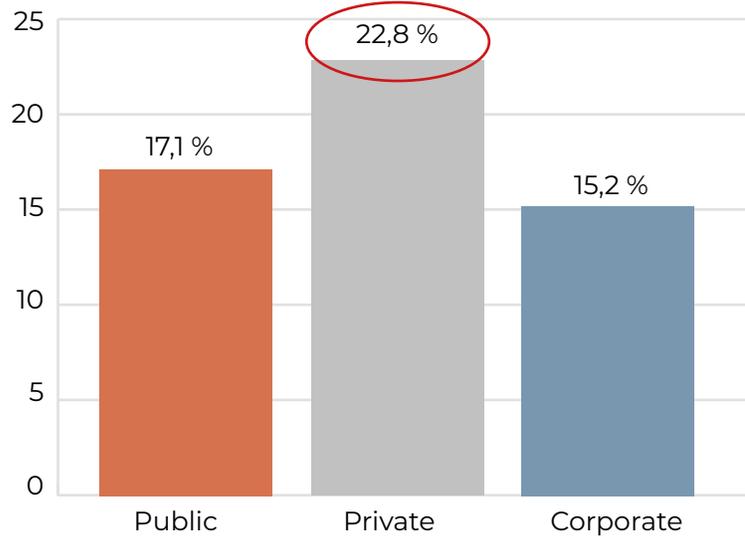


Younger members with ten years of practice or less are proportionally more affected by burnout (22.4%) than practitioners with more than ten years of experience (16.5%).

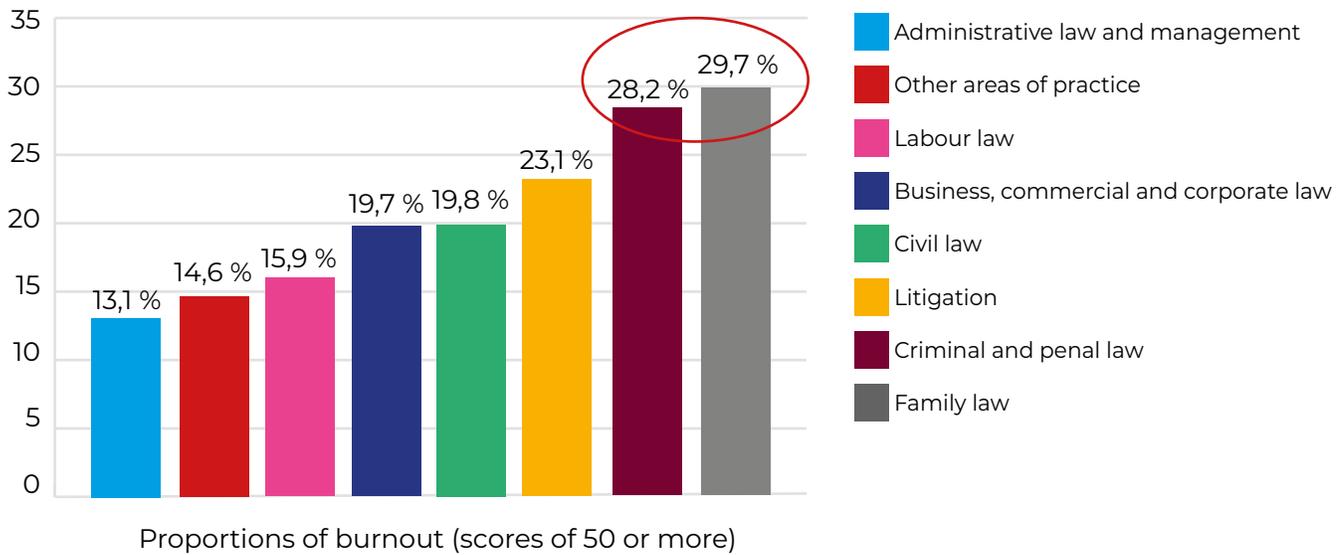
The same is true for women (20.7%) compared to men (15.9%).

The private sector is most at risk of burnout; so are the areas of family law, criminal and penal law, and litigation.

Proportions of burnout by sector



Proportions of burnout by area of practice

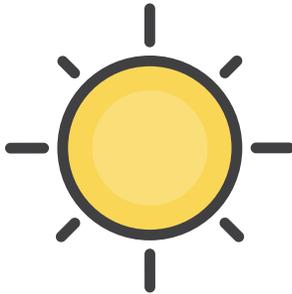


3. Well-being

Well-being should not be seen as the opposite of psychological distress. Some people may experience significant distress, but they may also experience some well-being in their work. These two concepts are complementary in understanding mental health in the workplace. Well-being comprises an affective and cognitive dimension and is measured through three main dimensions: serenity, commitment to work and social harmony.

Young lawyers with ten years of experience or less are those with the lowest levels of well-being. Similarly, lawyers in private practice, litigation and family law have the lowest well-being averages.

Higher or lower well-being?



Men with more than ten years of practice

In-house lawyers

Labour law

No more and no less

Public vs private

Self-employed vs "others"



Young lawyers with less than ten years of practice and women

Lawyers in private practice

Litigation

Family law

4. Risk or protective factors

It is observed that certain factors are more likely to significantly increase, while others significantly reduce psychological distress, burnout and well-being.

Psychological distress

Significantly increase psychological distress

- Stressors related to regulated professions
- Technology
- Job insecurity
- Emotional demands
- Work-family conflict
- External locus of control*
- Smoking

Significantly reduce psychological distress

- Career opportunities
- Age
- Consistency between personal and organizational values
- Self-esteem

Burnout

Significantly increase burnout

- Stressors related to regulated professions
- Technology
- Quantitative work overload
- Qualitative work overload
- Emotional demands
- Having to meet billable hours targets
- Work-family conflict
- Being in a relationship
- Being a woman
- External locus of control*

Significantly reduce burnout

- Harmonious relations with clients
- Career opportunities
- Use of skills
- Age
- Consistency between personal and organizational values
- Self-esteem

Well-being

Significantly increase well-being

- Harmonious relations with colleagues
- Recognition at work
- Career opportunities
- Job insecurity**
- Quantitative work overload**
- Social support outside of work
- Age
- Consistency between personal and organizational values
- Self-esteem

Significantly reduce well-being

- Technology
- Emotional demands
- Having to meet billable hours targets
- Lack of resources at work
- Work-family conflict
- External locus of control*

*Locus of control refers to an individual's beliefs about the control they have over important events in their lives. More specifically, individuals with an external locus of control believe that the events that occur in their lives are a function of chance, luck, fate, in short, forces external to them and beyond their control.

**At first glance, the results for well-being may seem surprising. The explanations put forward in the report are as follows: "The results also tend to show that job insecurity is associated with higher levels of well-being. While this result may seem contradictory, it is possible that people exposed to low job security are exposed to it by choice, which could explain this result" and "(...) workload can also be synonymous with challenge and self-actualization, which could explain this result. Therefore, although work overload significantly increases the level of burnout, it also contributes to a certain well-being among participating professionals."

Action Plan

The results of this study will have a significant impact on the development of the legal profession and the mental health of the members of the Barreau du Québec.

It is worth mentioning that the Barreau has already put in place certain resources to meet the needs of its members and encourage them to use the programs and services offered to the legal community such as the assistance program for members of the Barreau (PAMBA), online training courses on stress and work-related burnout, a guide to encourage work life balance and career coaching for lawyers starting out.

However, in the wake of this report, the Barreau du Québec has started to seriously reflect on other measures to be taken and has already taken action on certain points:

- Set-up of a working group tasked with proposing concrete actions likely to improve the situation.
- Substantial increase in the contribution to the assistance program for members of the Barreau (PAMBA) from \$26 to \$35 as of the next annual registration.
- Production and distribution of free online training courses.

To read the full report, click here. 