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Abstract title Work characteristics, work stressors and psychological distress in firefighters

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Background: Few studies of firefighters and psychological distress have explored the effects of work characteristics, such as overtime, number of calls, etc. with work stressors such as job strain, effort-reward imbalance (ERI) or work-family conflict (WFC).

Aim: To explore the effects of the work environment on psychological distress in firefighters.

Methods: A cross-sectional web survey among 840 firefighters (FF's) in Southern California was conducted October 2009. Complete data was available for 203/231 respondents (96% male, 42.5 + 9.8 years). Work characteristics included: firehouse size, overtime, calls/shift, and job title. Work stressors include job demands and control, job strain (JCQ); ERI; and WFC. The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) measured psychological distress.

Results: A comparison of our sample with data from a wellness-fitness evaluation of the same firefighters (N=750 of 840) suggests our sample is representative in terms of age, gender, race, and job title. Forty-one percent of the FF's reported high levels of distress (GHQ>15). Only the combination of high calls (>6) and overtime (>15 24hr shifts/month) was significantly associated with WFC. The work stressors, high job demands, low job control, job strain, ERI and WFC, were significantly associated with psychological distress after controlling for age, gender, SES and marital status. When WFC was included in a model, the relationship between distress and job strain was no longer significant.

Conclusions: Work characteristics, calls and overtime, and the stressors job demands and control, job strain, ERI, and WFC were associated directly or indirectly via WFC with psychological distress in firefighters.