

RACISM, BIAS, AND HARASSMENT TOWARDS FRONTLINE WORKERS: EXPERIENCES OF ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

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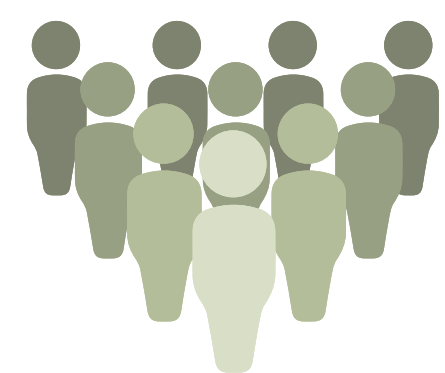
INTRODUCTION

Who are Environmental Public Health Professionals (EHPs)?

- They consist of Public Health Inspectors and Environmental Health Officers
- They inspect facilities, control infectious diseases, and mitigate environmental health hazards

What is harassment?

- Harassment is defined as negative behaviour based on various identity group characteristics (e.g. race, gender, ethnic origin, etc.)
- Can also occur in a form that is not linked to a particular identity group (e.g. bullying, aggression)



What is the issue?

Due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, EHPs have been placed in high-risk and stressful environments when enforcing public health orders (CIPHI, 2020).

With the work of front-line service workers being amplified, staff who are disproportionately people of colour have been met with racism and several EHPs, regardless of their ethnic background, have faced harassment (Adler & Bhattacharyya, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, harassment, racism, and social inequities, including anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, have exacerbated across Canada, tripling since the start of the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020).

METHODS

A mixed-method, cross-sectional online survey was conducted:

- The questionnaire was composed of 18 questions with closed and open-ended response options
- Closed-ended questions collected socio-demographic data (ie. age, gender, race)
- Began on June 10, 2021 and ended on June 25, 2021

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative survey data (i.e., closed-ended questions).

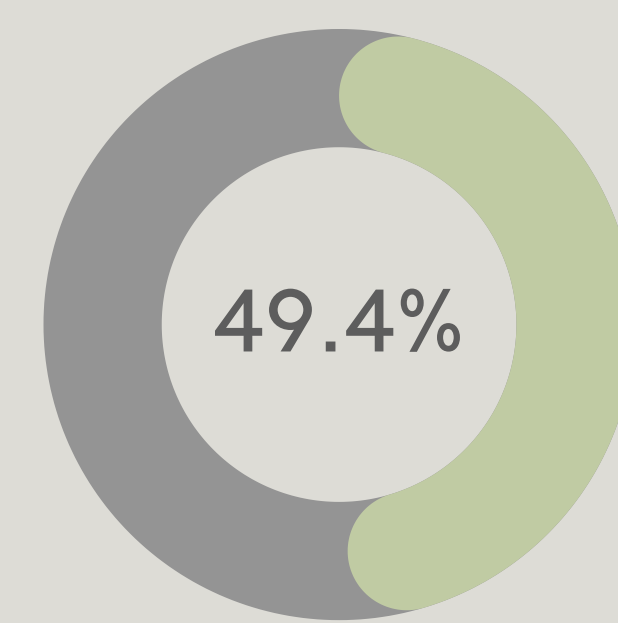
Answers to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed by using NVivo 12 (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia).

Thematic analysis was also employed. Once all comments were coded and merged across reviewers, four main themes were identified.

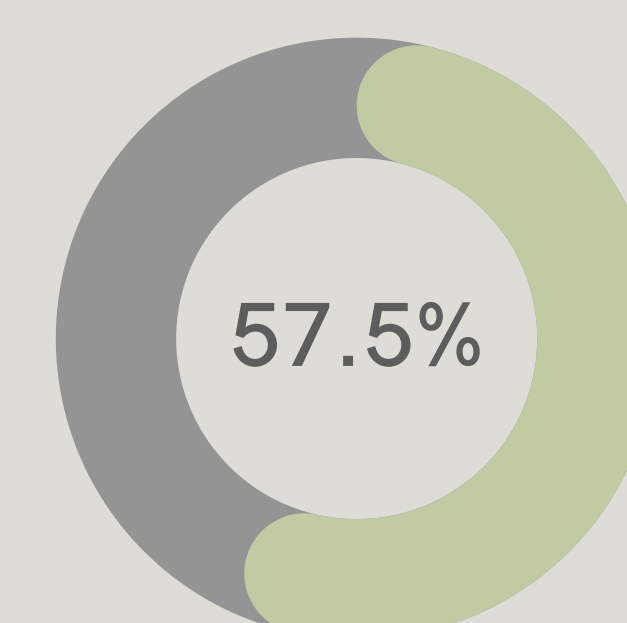
RESULTS

A total of 80 relevant survey respondents were received:

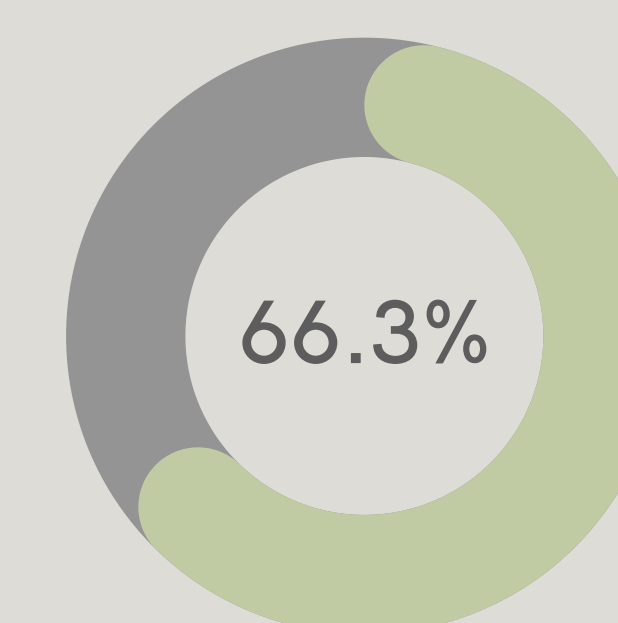
- Most respondents were working in the province of Ontario (n = 43, 15.8%)
- A majority of EHPs were between the ages of 30 to 55, were female, and identified as white
- Most respondents (n = 50, 64.9%) reported confidence that their supervisor is committed to responding to harassment concerns



Experiencing forms of harassment during their COVID-19 pandemic response work.



Witnessed forms of harassment towards colleagues during the pandemic response work.



Experiencing higher levels of harassment because of the pandemic.

In the qualitative analysis, four themes were identified from the generated codes:

1) Harassment

- Respondents had been harassed verbally, threatened by others and faced extensive name-calling and belittling

2) Public Frustration

- With COVID-19 restrictions, masks and vaccine rollout, the public has been placing many of their frustrations towards EHPs

3) Lack of Support

- Respondents felt that harassment complaints and incidents were not taken seriously by management

4) Mental Health Stress & Fear

- EHP's reported significant stress, anxiety, and significant mental health issues

CONCLUSION

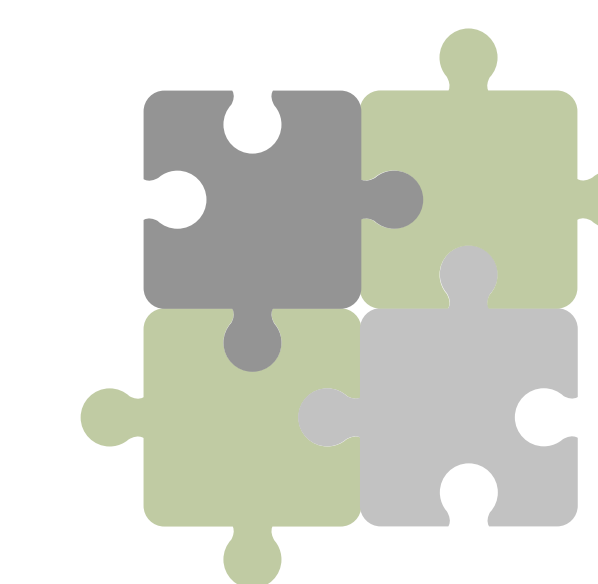
Our study reveals that in many instances EHPs have been treated unfairly regardless of their ethnic origin, racial background, gender, or any other socio-demographic characteristic. The job position alone has caused staff to become harassed and threatened as revealed by many participants.

Challenges faced:

- Barriers for EHPs to complete their assigned work, especially when interacting with the public
- High stress and burnout from an immense workload
- Fear of harassment incidents towards themselves and their families
- Did not receive adequate support from their management during the pandemic response

What to improve on:

- Increase staffing
- Provide accessible mental health support
- Provide a formal reporting and follow-up mechanism



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