

**PHYSICAL HEALTH OF POLICE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES WORKERS
IN NSW**

Organisation: Police Association of NSW

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Police Association of NSW



Submission to the
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Inquiry: Physical health of police and
emergency services workers in NSW

PANSW submission to Inquiry on Physical Health of Police and Emergency Services Workers in NSW

Improving the physical fitness of police officers is beneficial to their health and overall wellbeing, and may also reduce the risk of injury, both in likelihood and severity.

This would benefit officers, and assist the NSWPF in the management of the organisation through reduced injury related absenteeism.

The PANSW has therefore supported, and actively campaigned for strategies to assist officers improve their fitness and overall health.

We believe that the most beneficial approach is to increase police officers' opportunities and access to activities and programs that improve their fitness and health.

We have not seen any recent proposal to impose universal ongoing mandatory fitness standards on police officers, nor any material indicating the physical fitness of police officers is inhibiting the performance of their duties that would justify the imposition of such a standard. If such a proposal were to be made, this would not be supported. The imposition of such a standard would not be the most beneficial way to improve the health and wellbeing of police officers, nor the effective performance of their duties.

The benefits of improving physical health and fitness

There are a number of reasons why it would be beneficial to assist officers in maintaining or improving their physical fitness.

Most health organisations around the world recommend a target amount of physical exercise (usually around 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise per week)(World Health Organisation 2018), and studies also indicate that any increase in physical exercise is beneficial (Warburton & Bredin 2017).

Therefore strategies to increase opportunities for police officers to participate in additional exercise are likely to produce a benefit to both officers and the NSWPF.

Overall health and wellbeing

Maintaining or improving physical fitness improves overall health and wellbeing, including mental health.

The Australian Department of Health lists the benefits of physical exercise for adults aged 18 to 64 as:

- Reduce the risk of, or help manage, type 2 diabetes.
- Reduce the risk of, or help manage, cardiovascular disease (CVD).
- Maintain and/or improve blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels.
- Reduce the risk of, and assist with rehabilitation from, some cancers.
- Prevent unhealthy weight gain and assist with weight loss.
- Build strong muscles and bones.

- Create opportunities for socialising and meeting new people.
- Help to prevent and manage mental health problems.
- Help to develop and maintain overall physical and mental well-being (Australian Government Department of Health 2019).

Unfortunately, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019), only 15% of Australian adults meet the guidelines for both physical activity and muscle strengthening.

Police officers work long hours, perform physically tiring jobs, and work shifts at all hours of the day. This makes it difficult for them to exercise regularly and consistently.

Strategies that provide police officers with better opportunities to engage in physical exercise should be supported, without placing another level of compliance on those officers.

Reduce injury risk

The general evidence supports a policy position whereby physical fitness is a strategy that can reduce the risk of occupational physical injury, in particular musculoskeletal injuries, for police officers (Lentz et al. 2019; The International Association of Chiefs of Police 2018). As such, this is certainly an issue that should be addressed, albeit with a focus on injury reduction rather than compliance to particular fitness standards.

In workplaces around NSW, including emergency services agencies, the frequency of musculoskeletal injuries is increasing, so investment in programs to assist emergency services personnel maintain or increase their physical fitness throughout their career has likely benefits that would lead to a direct return on investment for those agencies.

Mental Health

The link between physical exercise and improved mental health outcomes is well established (Australian Government Health Direct 2019).

In fact, many NSWPF programs already use this knowledge in treating psychological injuries of NSW police officers, most notably the highly successful NSWPF RECON Programs.

This strong link between physical exercise and improved mental health outcomes again shows the likelihood of an effective return on investment for emergency service agencies who commit funding to wellbeing strategies that include opportunities to enable personnel to exercise.

However, physical fitness should not be considered the only strategy to improve police mental health. Physical exercise can be effective at improving overall mental health, and as part of treatment approaches to psychological injuries, but many mental health issues or psychological injuries also require specialised mental health treatment options. As such, physical fitness should be considered one component of a holistic approach.

Performance of duties

Increased physical fitness and strength does improve the performance of *some* policing tasks, however there is a vast array of police work for which other characteristics or skill sets are far more important. In fact, some academic reviews of police health have asserted that police work is primarily a sedentary occupation (Craven et al. 2017).

Whether the physical tasks required of police officers require a particular standard of physical fitness has been a contentious issue in some studies (Gaines et al. 1993; Lonsway 2003). Having said this, there are specific sections within NSWPF that require a high level of physical fitness, such as tactical operations and diving. These sections already have physical fitness standards placed on their officers.

While physical fitness is one element of policing, the perception by society that police work occurs predominately in physical situations requiring officers who are capable of engaging in this kind of behaviour is no longer the case (Haarr & Morash 1999; Marks 2008; Robinson 2013). While there are times when policing requires physical behaviour, this is not something that is prevalent in day-to-day police work (Ffrench & Waugh 1998; Swan 2016; Waddington 1999). In recent times, community policing models have shifted the focus from physical to other aspects of policing (Swan 2016).

Police officers require high levels of skill and aptitude in areas other than physical fitness, such as communication skills, decision-making, de-escalation skills and time management. For example, in potentially violent situations, it is highly preferable that police officers have the communication skills to de-escalate a situation, rather than rely on physical fitness to engage in a violent situation when it occurs. It has been asserted that police officers themselves do not deem physical ability as critically important to doing their job (Bissett et al. 2012).

Over-prioritisation of physical fitness, be it in recruitment requirements, or ongoing physical fitness standards, creates a risk of diminishing those other skill sets. For example, imposing ongoing physical fitness requirements might diminish the retention rates of officers above a certain age demographic, thereby losing officers with skill levels typically obtained from years of experience.

Raising the physical requirements at recruitment would skew the intake of new officers towards persons with higher physical fitness, possibly while losing candidates with high levels of other skills that would otherwise have been useful additions to the NSWPF. This has been found to be the case especially for female applicants, who are often excluded from recruitment as a result of these physical fitness requirements (Prenzler 1996).

Further to this point, it has been found that female police officers tend to be more time poor outside of working hours due to child care commitments (Broderick & Co 2019), meaning that the levels they would be required to maintain under enforced fitness standards will create further inequity. Given that the NSWPF have committed to increasing numbers of female police especially in the senior ranks (New South Wales Government 2018; New South Wales Police Force 2019), it is contradictory to make this process harder for them.

New South Wales Police Force strategies regarding recruitment, retention, career progression and workforce allocation need to harness a varied skill set to meet the many demands on policing in NSW.

The PANSW therefore submits that standards of physical fitness should not be prioritised over any other valuable skill sets, as this could be more harmful to the NSWPF than the benefits derived from prioritising physical fitness.

This again supports the position that:

- strategies to increase officers' access and opportunity to physical fitness should be invested in, to increase physical fitness without excluding those who may have other strengths;
- mandatory fitness standards should not be imposed on officers after the recruitment phase; and
- the physical tests at the recruitment phase should not over-prioritise physical fitness to the potential exclusion of other candidates with a variety of beneficial skill sets. Any required standards of physical fitness at any stage must also be research based to demonstrate why they are necessary to perform the role of a police officer.

Injury Management

New South Wales police officers are being injured more frequently, and taking longer to return to work. This is demonstrated by the increase in average number of hours lost per employee through workplace injury, which in the last financial year was at 78 hours (New South Wales Police Force 2019), up from 45 in 2015-16 (New South Wales Police Force 2016).

A significant proportion of time off work due to injury, in particular those injuries that result in a long-time off work, is caused by serious psychological injuries, which we understand to be outside the terms of this Inquiry.

Officers with physical injuries are not so highly represented amongst those who spend long periods of time off work when compared with the harm caused by psychological risks and injuries. Therefore, we do not want to conflate the comments regarding injury management and return to work procedures for those different categories of injury types. We accept that psychological injury may be mitigated somewhat by physical activity, but this does not need to be met through fitness standards. Rather than placing the burden on the officer to meet particular standards, it is suggested that the NSWPF provide the environment for higher levels of fitness to occur.

The PANSW sees potential improvements in the rate of return to work for officers with physical injuries, through increased availability of suitable positions, utilising work modifications when necessary.

In our experience, injured officers with a significant capacity to contribute to the NSWPF, are being underutilised due to an assumption that a police officer must be able to perform every conceivable task that might arise in the course of their duties. There are cases where individuals remain off work for extended periods of time because suitable duties are not available for them. The solution is a more flexible approach to each job role, allowing for

officers to work to their strengths, rather than requiring them to be capable of every potential task that may arise.

As noted above, police officers use a variety of skills, and it is incorrect to assume that physically demanding interactions form the bulk of day-to-day duties. Therefore, officers whose injuries mean they cannot perform every conceivable task, should be able to perform those duties they are capable of, with allocations of taskings ensuring other officers perform the tasks they cannot participate in.

With the high sophistication of workforce allocation programs, frequency and time analysis of police force tasks, and measurement of work demand and human resources, the NSWPF has the capacity to measure the number of human hours needed to perform different task categories that a work unit is needed to perform, and allocate personnel of varying physical capacity to meet that demand.

Strategies to improve fitness and health

Consistent with the evidence above the PANSW supports strategies which assist police officers maintain or improve their physical fitness and health, without imposing mandatory physical fitness standards.

Such strategies include:

- increase police officers' access and opportunities to physical fitness programs and activities;
- programs that provide police with best practice information regarding their health and fitness, and tailored advice to improve it;
- expand programs that assist officers in recovery, rehabilitation and return to work from physical injury.

Existing physical fitness and health related programs, delivered through the collaboration between the NSWPF and the PANSW, includes:

- RECON Programs (Reconditioning, Restart, and Reconnect),
- Functional Movement Screen,
- Eat Smart,
- Your Health Check,
- Physical Training Instructors, and
- Fitness Passport.

Conclusion

The PANSW supports any strategies to assist police officers in increasing the physical fitness, without placing mandatory standards upon them. Police officers need to be fit and healthy to ensure both their physical and mental resilience are at optimal levels.

Physical fitness does reduce the likelihood of physical and psychological injuries for police, therefore approaches to assist police should be considered appropriately.

Policing tasks requiring physical fitness are far from, and largely not the majority of, tasks required to be performed by police officers, even on the front line. As such, arguments that police require a particular standard of fitness are unhelpful.

Communication, problem solving, decision making, moral reasoning (Willis & Mastrofski 2018) and time-management skills are examples of other skill sets that are arguably needed to the same or greater degree than physical fitness. There should not be an assumption that physical fitness is more important than these requirements. Rather, all of these skills (as well as others) should be seen as important, with each individual having some of each to varying degrees, and contributing their own skill sets to the overall team.

Physical fitness requirements create barriers to recruitment and retention of officers whose strengths lie in these other important skill sets. This is not to say that officers should not be encouraged to be fit, but that fitness should not be held as the most important requirement to be a police officer. In fact, it should be seen as a need to maintain the overall health of our officers to prevent injury. Excluding officers solely on the basis of physical fitness is to the detriment of the NSWPF and to the community, especially in regards to women and police who are older.

Organisations, including the NSWPF, now have a greater ability to measure the task load falling into different task categories. It is not beyond the NSWPF ability to determine the task load for each job role to ascertain whether there is a physical fitness standard requirement, and therefore make resource allocation and rostering decisions to meet those requirements. This would allow the organisation to use the skill sets of those officers who, through injury or fitness levels may not be as capable of performing tasks requiring high levels of physical fitness.

Having said this, it is accepted that some job roles within NSWPF may require particular fitness standards. As such, it is posited that any proposal to establish additional physical fitness standards or requirements applying to police officers generally, or to duty types or positions, would need to:

- Be done in close consultation with the Police Association of NSW; and
- Provide officers with the opportunity to train while on duty in order to meet the requisite standard; or
- Provide police officers with a corresponding pay increase reflective of the additional work required to maintain those standards and the increased productivity that this is deemed to be to the organisation.

For the reasons listed above, strategies that assist police officers to maintain or improve their physical fitness without imposing mandatory standards, are a preferable approach to physical fitness for police officers.

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