

Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census

Research Brief

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

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Overview

The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census was a voluntary online survey distributed to all Victorian lawyers holding practising certificates. It sought to explore systemic issues affecting the legal profession and included a wellbeing module completed by over 1,500 lawyers. The module used validated screening instruments to measure psychological distress and burnout risk, alongside measures of life satisfaction and intention to leave the profession.¹

1. For the full report, see Tenielle Hagland et al. *Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census*. Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026.

The problem is widespread and interconnected

More than half (53%) of Victorian lawyers surveyed were experiencing some level of psychological distress, with 13% at severe levels. Over a third (36%) experienced symptoms of anxiety and almost a quarter (23%) symptoms of depression. More than half (53%) were at risk of burnout, with a quarter (25%) at very high risk. Psychological distress and burnout, while conceptually distinct, were powerfully related in practice: among those with severe psychological distress, 79% were at very high risk of burnout.

Psychological distress and burnout are not evenly distributed

Younger lawyers, women, LGBTIQ+ lawyers, and those with long-term health conditions or disabilities all experienced significantly higher rates of psychological distress and burnout. Around one in 5 lawyers aged 20 to 29 reported severe psychological distress; among those aged 60 and over, fewer than one in 10 did. The more severe a lawyer's long-term health condition or disability, the higher their likelihood of experiencing severe psychological distress.

While psychological distress and burnout shared some common associations, they diverged in ways consistent with burnout as a more directly work-related construct. Both outcomes decreased with age, but burnout was also associated with years of practising experience independently of age, with risk elevated among those in mid-career (5 to 19 years of practice), suggesting a period of professional vulnerability that is not solely a function of age. Income followed a similar pattern, relating to burnout in a way it did not relate to psychological distress, with burnout risk peaking in the \$120,001 to \$160,000 income bracket.

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But it is not just who lawyers are - it is what they experience at work

Critically, when multivariate analysis accounted for personal and professional characteristics simultaneously, most demographic differences lost independent significance. Gender, sexual orientation, income, and firm size all fell away. What remained were workplace experiences, conditions and culture. Perceiving workload as unacceptable, frequently facing conflicts with professional obligations, experiencing or witnessing uncivil workplace behaviours, experiencing sexual harassment, and feeling unfairly compensated were all independently and highly significantly associated with greater psychological distress and risk of burnout.

The multivariate analysis reframes what might otherwise appear to be a demographic issue. The findings suggest that demographic differences in psychological distress and burnout are largely explained by differences in workplace experience. Younger lawyers, women, and LGBTIQ+ lawyers, for example, do not appear to experience worse outcomes primarily because of who they are, but because they are more likely to encounter adverse workplace conditions.

These workplace adversities are also interconnected, and of lawyers reporting at least one, over 60% reported multiple. To examine the cumulative effect, responses across the six adversity measures were combined into a count, with the results confirming that the more adverse conditions a lawyer experiences, the greater their psychological distress and risk of burnout. Among those reporting no adversity indicators, 4% had severe psychological distress and 9% were at very high risk of burnout. Among those reporting five of the six indicators these figures rose to 40% and 58% respectively, and among those reporting all six, to 80% and 77%.

The consequences extend well beyond work

The consequences of psychological distress and burnout extend well beyond work itself, into broader aspects of life and subjective wellbeing. Psychological distress and burnout were both associated with substantially lower life satisfaction / subjective wellbeing across all six domains measured: physical health, personal relationships, time, financial situation, job satisfaction, and overall satisfaction with life.

Psychological distress and burnout were also associated with intention to leave the profession, and qualitative analysis of the reasons lawyers provided for wanting to leave, setting aside retirement, returned repeatedly to the same themes: burnout, stress and fatigue, high workload and billing pressure, toxic or unsupportive workplaces, and disillusionment with the profession.

Workplace conditions are the key lever for change

A central finding of this analysis is that workplace conditions matter. While bivariate analyses identify which groups of lawyers experience higher rates of psychological distress and burnout, multivariate analyses consistently show that it is the conditions lawyers experience at work that are most strongly and independently associated with both outcomes. Workload, professional conflict, incivility, harassment, and unfair compensation are not incidental features of legal practice; they are psychosocial hazards that employers, professional bodies, and regulators have the capacity and, increasingly, the obligation to address.