

Challenges for FIFO Workers in Australia



Crosscare Migrant Project

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Introduction

Australia experienced a mining boom from 2000 until recently with annual production doubling in the last 20 years, becoming one of the world's leading mining countries. There are over 365 mines and approximately 270,000 workers. The Fly In/Fly out (FIFO) working model was adopted which involves workers travelling to remote mining areas to stay for a number of 'roster' days and returning home for a fixed break. FIFO is largely represented in Western Australia. The FIFO sector has been successfully recruiting workers for two decades in various types of work.

Workers and the employers state the positives to FIFO work:

- High remuneration packages providing financial security for workers and their families
- Few expenses while on-site
- Compressed schedules provide the workers with extended leisure time during rest & relaxation, affording more quality time with family
- Having a family based in an urban area provides stable opportunities for education and social facilities.
- Growth of personal independence and freedom
- Strengthening coping skills
- Bonding and friendship ties
- Travel to new locations for jobs
- Meet new people
- Travel frequently for pleasure during time off
- Clear separation between personal and work life
- Opportunity to study on-site
- Access to healthy food options on site
- Accumulate frequent flyer points that can be used on rostered time off

Crosscare Migrant Project work with both intending and returning Irish emigrants. Links with Australian services for Irish emigrants have raised some concerns for people considering taking up FIFO work. Research has identified the costs and benefits to FIFO lifestyles for workers and their families to enable employers to support workers to minimise the costs and maximise the benefits of FIFO work. This report was compiled as an information resource for Irish support organisations based in Australia.

The content has also informed a published leaflet for Irish FIFO workers in Australia available at www.migrantproject.ie/fifo.

Challenges

Workers who have contributed accounts of their experiences to various surveys / reports / services have cited a number of challenges that they faced. Whilst each person has different circumstances and experiences, there are a number of challenges listed here to consider where appropriate.

Rosters

A high compression roster and the fatigue that follows it is a major challenge presented to FIFO workers.

- Many of the resource industry sites in Australia operate on a 24 hours, 7 days a week basis, therefore 12 hour shifts are often the standard.¹
- A typical roster known in the industry as a 'swing' would be 14 days on, 7 days off.² Many swings however are of higher compression such as 4 weeks on, 7 days off. These high compression rosters place the FIFO worker at a greater risk to their physical and mental health. Fatigue is raised to dangerous levels towards the end of these high compression rosters.³
- The long length of these 'swings' often impact on family life, such as missing special occasions like birthdays and Christmas and not being available for the daily family routine.
- 'Compression creep' is the time travelling home at the conclusion of a swing which significantly encroaches into the time off for workers. This shortens the gap between swings for fatigue recovery.⁴ Travel following completion rosters is done in workers' own time and can significantly reduce their time with family. Workers commonly reported driving long distances after their flight and after having completed a full days' work.⁵

Fatigue

Fatigue is a major concern for higher compression rosters. Potential FIFO workers should be aware of the risks.

- 12 hour shifts over a period of 4 weeks combined with travelling long distances to and from the site can create a dangerous risk of fatigue related accidents both on site and off.⁶

- Fatigue related injuries are often at higher risk towards the end of swings.⁷
- There appears to be a heightened danger in fatigue among night shift workers: they have reported more acute cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes in comparison to day workers.⁸
- The problems attributed to night shift fatigue to be aware of are,
 - Affected short term memory, concentration levels and alertness.
 - Emotional problems such as a depressed mood, irritability, anxiety and stress.
 - Behavioural problems such as the consumption of excess alcohol and cigarettes, sedentary lifestyle and poor sleeping habits. These habits can also transfer negatively to home life.
 - Night shift workers also reported poorer quality of sleep which negatively impacted performance.
- Extreme heat onsite (50 degrees +) can be particularly challenging for emigrant workers who are not yet used to the conditions.

Bullying

A competitive culture is reported to exist among FIFO workers, such as comparing salaries or 'manliness', this can lead to some difficulties in the workplace.⁹

- Bullying often goes unreported due to it perhaps involving a supervisor.¹⁰ There is also a reluctance to lodge complaints due to the culture of toughness in the industry and fear of repercussions such as job loss.
- The fact that FIFO workers are constantly surrounded by their colleagues while on-site can mean a bullying problem is often compounded as there is less scope to avoid someone.

Stigma

It has been reported that a 'tough guy' culture exists among FIFO workers. This culture makes it less likely for individuals to talk about their problems. Workers are often reluctant to seek help due to the fear of being perceived as weak from their peers or fear of losing their job from supervisors.

- In the 'stoic/macho' culture among FIFO workers there is typically a stigma associated with seeking help or being seen as weak. There is a misplaced focus on physical toughness, emotional control and self-reliance.
- This stigma surrounding mental health and fear of displaying weakness among workers results in a reluctance to disclosing that problems exist, increasing stress levels, job insecurity and compounds mental health conditions.
- Workers are also reluctant to be honest about mental health issues at job interviews. Reports of companies identifying those workers with mental health problems as a risk, in consequence being removed from the site and even losing their job.¹¹

Personal relationship strain

The fact that a FIFO worker may be absent from their partner and family for long periods of time, can place a strain on a worker's relationships. Workers are unable to contact partners during their shifts and are therefore unable to respond to any urgent issues which may arise.

- Workers have a limited window of time to contact partners and family members at the conclusion of their shifts, which may be affected by problems with the communication technology.
- A major stress for FIFO workers dealing with depression and anxiety is the worry of relationship problems and that their partners back home may leave.¹²
- Partners of FIFO workers have indicated that they also feel isolated, which leads to mental health issues of their own.
- FIFO children are reportedly experience greater instances of bullying at school and feel increased pressure to succeed academically.¹³

- Sole parenting fatigue is an issue for partners at home, heightened by other issues such as availability of communication with the FIFO partner, loneliness, parenting issues and managing children's behaviour.
- FIFO families can suffer from feelings of loneliness and a sense of isolation, feelings of sadness, grief, and loss, as well as feelings of abandonment. Workers can also suffer from feelings of guilt for leaving the family.

Accommodation

When thinking about FIFO, an essential consideration before taking up employment is the standard of accommodation available on-site.

- Some sites have booked out the local towns' accommodation for several years including motels, caravan parks and hotels. These sites also use accommodation villages, purpose built to house the workers on-site.
- Sometimes these accommodation villages have very basic amenities, a fenced perimeter and security checkpoints with bag checks.
- Depending on location and employer, accommodation can vary in standard and quality. Many offer air conditioning, restaurant quality food and superior facilities such as gyms and other recreational outlets, others only provide a wet mess (bar).
- Boredom on site can develop with the limited and restricted living conditions as well as the possible repetitive nature of the job.
- The remoteness of these sites allows less freedom due to the highly regulated nature of these sites.¹⁴
- Potential FIFO workers should be aware of 'Motelling' practices, where a worker is given a different room each time he visits the site. Workers who 'motel' can find it difficult to establish familiarity with other workers. While some workers may know others on site from previous contracts or previous jobs. Accommodation villages can be lonely and isolating places, having a regular neighbour allows for familiarity and stability. Constant reallocation of rooms does not allow for that familiarity and can result in a 'keep myself to myself' type mentality.
- Some sites also employ the practice of 'Hot bedding', where the same room and same bed are used by two occupants on opposing shifts.

Alcohol and drug use

With the extended leisure time at the end of a 'swing' and the consequence of long periods of separation from family, an increased disposable income and a limited access to regular recreational activities, a culture of partying while at home has been created, especially among younger unattached FIFO workers.¹⁵ On-site bars also offer the opportunity for drinking between shifts.

- There are reports of heavy alcohol consumption once returned home to escape the pressures of work, this in turn usually impacts negatively on family relationships.
- The wet mess (tavern/bar) is normally very popular with the majority of workers at the conclusion of their shifts.¹⁶
- The purchase of alcohol in the wet mess varies from site to site in terms of restrictions. Some sites were strictly administered by a swipe-card system for limited amounts.¹⁷ On sites where accommodation facilities were located within a town, there are no restrictions, as alcohol can be freely purchased from a licensed premise in the town. Strict alcohol breath tests and drug tests are administered to the workers before their shift begins.
- The wet mess appears to be an important part of the FIFO lifestyle, and the venue most popular with workers for social interaction. Therefore routinely drinking each day becomes normalised for workers, which can develop into habits and a means of coping when under stress or dealing with anxieties.
- Boredom on-site during rostered days off (RDOs) and workers often binge on alcohol as there is no requirement to pass a breath test.
- Those who do not drink may feel isolated and find it difficult to socialise if they do not fit in with the culture of having a drink at the end of a shift. This can lead to people spending their evenings in their rooms and missing out on social interaction.
- There are reports of workers using methamphetamines on compressed work schedules in order to remain awake during shift work. Illicit drugs are often a means of coping with other stresses or mental health problems. Health workers expressed concern that use of illicit substances of this nature was spreading, and that the effects on the mental and physical health of users were devastating.¹⁸

Health

Mental health

- It is widely regarded and researched that FIFO workers are at higher risk of mental illness and suicide compared to that of the general population.¹⁹
- The isolation from family and other supports can lead to an increased dependence on alcohol, drugs and prostitution.²⁰
- The 'Split-Lifestyle' can lead to substance abuse, relationship breakdowns, post-traumatic stress disorder and social phobias.

Physical health

During the intense FIFO lifestyle, extended hours, stress and relationship worry, it is easy to fall into a sedentary trap and be too exhausted or mindful to exercise and eat healthily. It is important during the FIFO swing to maintain good physical health through regular exercise and portion control.

Sexual health

- There are concerns among health workers about the rise in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) directly related to the FIFO workforce.
- Particularly in Western Australia, doctors are seeing an increasing number of FIFO patients, due to cheap Southeast Asia holidays, particularly among young men with sizable disposable incomes, which are leading not only to high rate of STIs but also the introduction of Southeast Asian strains of disease.²¹

Women in FIFO

There are added challenges for the female FIFO worker to be aware of.

- In the male dominated resource sector there have been reports from female workers, on issues such as a lack of privacy, being the focus of attention, coping with male site behaviour, lack of female contact and coping with harassment and discrimination.²²
- Psychological issues are listed as loneliness, anxiety, depression and social and professional isolation. The average weekly wage could be significantly lower than their male counterparts.

- Many women have reported facing pressure in their workplace to 'blend in'.²³ The feminine is denied in traditional mine culture and women are sometimes under great pressure to conform to the expectations of the dominant male culture.

Communication with family

Keeping in contact with loved ones while on-site is important to workers and the availability of communication facilities are required to support workers.

- Some sites may have issues with communication technology. Such issues include having no access to a mobile phone while on shift, little or no mobile coverage, volatile or no internet access, and poor quality mobile-wireless coverage.

Adjustment

The harsh weather conditions, the remoteness of sites and the poor communication technology on sites are challenging for most Australian workers who have never worked in these conditions. For workers from overseas these stresses can be increased.

- Be prepared in the FIFO lifestyle for time to adjust when both coming home and going back on-site.
- Sleeping patterns may be altered from that of shift work and the possibility of different time zones to where a person is permanently resident.

Financial

It is important to remain financially responsible whilst employed in FIFO; there is a strong link between financial difficulty and conflict within relationships.

- It is essential that with the influx of income that a person does not spiral into a credit trap and be forced to work in FIFO beyond their intentions, simply to pay back large loans.
- Particularly among younger FIFO workers the influx of income they often find themselves in can lead to a dynamic where they suddenly have buying power for which they have no experience.²⁴

Practical Advice

Things to look for in an employer

- Flexible rosters
- Quality accommodation facilities, en-suite, air conditioning, television and internet access, well insulated (sound- and temperature-wise)
- Sporting and recreation facilities e.g. pool, gym, tennis/basketball courts, team sports
- Mobile phone reception and free WIFI
- 24 hour on-site medical facilities with a doctor on call
- Opportunity for family to visit?
- Quality fresh food in the mess with lots of variation and healthy options available

Fatigue Management

- Keep alcohol, coffee and energy drink consumption to a minimum
- Get some exercise

Isolation Management

- Get involved in social events/ sports activities

Helpful Resources

Web-based Supports

Mining Family Matters – A web-based organisation sponsored by a range of oil and gas companies, provides support via an online community, e-newsletters, chat forums, publications such as the *'Survival Guide for Mining Families'* and *'Working Away: A Survival Guide'*.

<http://www.miningfm.com.au>

Miner's Promise – An Independent not-for-profit member-based organisation established to support employees of the resources sector and their immediate family by providing practical, emotional and financial support when impacted by a crisis event or death.

<http://www.minerspromise.org.au>

Mining Australia – A media website focusing on Australian mining issues and news.

<http://www.miningaustralia.com.au>

FIFO Families - A commercial web-based organisation that offers support to FIFO Families. The organisation provides opportunities for support and connection with other FIFO families through a range of resources including links to chat rooms, forums, seminars and e-newsletters.

www.fifofamilies.com.au

This FIFO Life - Mental health professionals Julie Loveny and Sue Crock are experienced social workers and the coordinators of This FIFO Life, a mental health online resource developed for FIFO workers and their families with funding from the WA government.

www.thisfifolife.com

BeyondBlue - Provides information and support for people living with depression and other mental illnesses.

www.beyondblue.org.au

Heads Up - Heads Up is all about giving individuals and businesses free tools and resources to take action for mentally healthy workplaces.

<http://www.headsup.org.au>

Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health – A not-for-profit that programs and services to people living and working in rural and remote Indigenous, agricultural/rural and mining/resource communities and organisations. <http://www.acrrmh.com.au>

The FIFO Toolkit - A physical or digital book, containing a collection of “tricks of the trade” around the mental wellbeing of FIFO workers.
<http://www.fifotoolkit.com>

FIFO INFO - This website provides information and resources for fly-in/fly-out employees and their families as well as for employers.
<http://www.fifoinfo.com.au/for-employees-and-families.html>

FIFO Wellness – Advice of wellness in FIFO living by recognised Lifestyle, food and wellness coach Steve Hord, author of ‘FIFO – There’s a healthier way’.
<http://www.fifowellness.com/>

R U OK? - A not-for-profit organisation, which campaigns and facilitates the campaigning for suicide awareness in Australia.
<https://ruok.org.au>

Lifeline WA - Lifeline connects people with care by providing services in suicide prevention, crisis support and mental health support.
<http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/seeking-help>

The Shed Online - The Shed Online is a place for men to socialise, network, make friends and share skills.
<https://www.theshedonline.org.au>

Irish Supports in Australia

Diplomatic and Consular Supports

Embassy of Ireland, Canberra

Website: www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/australia/

Phone: +61 (0) 2 6214 0000

Emergency out of hours assistance: +61 (0) 2 62140000

Consulate General of Ireland, Sydney

Website: www.dfa.ie/sydney

Phone: +61 (0) 2 9264 9635

Honorary Consul Perth

Mr. Martin Kavanagh

Website: <http://consulateofirelandwa.com.au/>

Phone: +61 (0) 8 6557 5802

Irish Support Organisations

The Claddagh Association Inc. (Perth, WA) - A voluntary non-profit organisation that aims to provide crisis support to people from the Irish community in times of hardship and trauma. They provide a safety net to assist people in crisis situations where all other avenues have been exhausted.

Website: <http://claddagh.org.au/>

Email: support@claddagh.org.au

Phone: +61 (0) 403 972 265

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/claddaghperth>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Claddagh-Association-369242429927868/?fref=ts

Australian Irish Welfare Bureau (Melbourne, VIC)

Email: aiwbmel@inet.net.au

Phone: +61 (0) 3 9482 3865

Irish Support Agency (Sydney, NSW)

Website: <http://irishsupportagency.org.au/>

Email: admin@iawb.org.au

Phone: 1800 186 966 or (+612) 9300 8019

Twitter: https://twitter.com/IAWB_NSW

Facebook: www.facebook.com/IrishSupportAgency/

Irish Australian Support Association of Queensland (Brisbane, QLD)

Website: www.iasaq.com.au

Email: info@iasaq.com.au

Phone: +61 (0) 7 3391 1300 or +61 (0) 432 087 328

Facebook: www.facebook.com/irishqld

Irish Families in Perth (Perth, WA)

Website: www.irishfamiliesinperth.com.au

Email: irishinperth@hotmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/irishfamilies.inperth/

Helplines

Miner's Promise – Independent not-for-profit member-based organisation established to support employees of the resources sector and their immediate family by providing practical, emotional and financial support when impacted by a crisis event or death.

Phone: 1300 124 014

The Working Away Alcohol and Drug Support Line - Confidential telephone support, information and referral service for those working away from home, their families and employers who are concerned about their own or another person's alcohol or drug use or mental health and wellbeing. The service is available 24/7 via phone on 1800 721 997 or workingaway@mhc.wa.gov.au

Alcohol and Drug Support Line on (08) 9442 5000 or country callers can call toll free on 1800 198 024

Parent and Family Drug Support Line on (08) 9442 5000 or country callers can call toll free on 1800 653 203

Kids Helpline - Provides free and confidential telephone and online counselling services specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.

1800 55 18 00

Beyondblue - Beyond blue offers information and support for those dealing with depression and anxiety

1300 224 636

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- ³ This FIFO Life: Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry Into Mental Illness in Fly-In, Fly-Out Workers, 2014, p. 8
- ⁴ *'The impact of FIFO work practices on metal health'*, Education and Health Standing Committee, Parliament of Western Australia p. 68
- ⁵ This FIFO Life: Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry Into Mental Illness in Fly-In, Fly-Out Workers, 2014, p. 8
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- ⁷ *'Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities?'* House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Regional Australia, 2013, p. 96
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- ¹² AMA Queensland: Submission to the Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources Committee, 2015 p. 3
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- ²³ "An Exploration of the Experiences of Women Who FIFO" Julie Pirotta, Curtin University of Technology. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2009 p. 37
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