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## Burnout and alcohol problems among urban transit operators in San Francisco

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### Abstract

Although occupational burnout has been linked with numerous psychosomatic symptoms and mental health problems, few studies have examined the association between burnout and substance use. This study assessed the contribution of burnout (Emotional Exhaustion — Maslach Burnout Inventory) to the risk of alcohol dependence and alcohol-related harm among a sample of urban transit operators. The study population consisted of 993 current drinkers who participated in the 1993–1995 San Francisco Muni Health and Safety Study. A series of multivariate logistic regression models were developed to analyze the association between burnout and risk of alcohol problems after adjustment for seniority, sociodemographic factors, and mean daily ounces of ethanol. The results indicate that burnout is associated with elevated risk of alcohol dependence (odds ratio [OR]=1.03; 95% confidence interval [CI]=1.01, 1.06). The association between burnout and alcohol-related harm, however, was attenuated. These findings suggest that transit operators with higher levels of burnout may be at increased risk for alcohol problems, particularly alcohol dependence. The temporal relationship between the development of burnout and the onset of alcohol problems among occupational cohorts warrants further investigation.

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## 1. Introduction

In contrast to the generic idea of occupational stress, burnout is considered a special type of prolonged occupational stress that results particularly from interpersonal demands at work that exceed the worker's resources (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998a). Occupational burnout was originally conceived of as a three-dimensional syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (becoming callous toward and withdrawn from clients or colleagues), and reduced personal accomplishment, primarily affecting workers in "people-oriented" professions — human services, health care, and education (Maslach & Leiter, 1997, p. 20). From a social history perspective, the "discovery" of burnout in the 1970s (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976) coincided with the 1974–1975 worldwide economic recession, major cutbacks in municipal budgets, and the beginnings of corporate restructuring, "downsizing," and layoffs. Especially for human services workers in public agencies, this translated into increased workloads, needier clients, fewer resources, and greater job stress (Cherniss, 1995). Most burnout research has focused on white-collar professionals whose jobs entail a high level of client interaction (e.g., teachers, nurses, and social workers), although increased attention has been turned toward workers in other occupational categories, including blue-collar workers (Grossi, Soares, Aengesleva, & Perski, 1999; Leiter & Robichaud, 1997; Malkinson, Kushnir, & Weisberg, 1997; Pines & Guendelman, 1995; Winnubst, 1993).

In several longitudinal studies, burnout has been found to lead to absenteeism and job turnover (Dignam & West, 1988; Firth & Britton, 1989; Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 1988; Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986; Wade, Cooley, & Savicki, 1986). Additionally, burnout has been linked with a range of psychosomatic and psychological maladies, including headaches, gastrointestinal illness, hypertension, muscle tension, chronic fatigue, and mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances (Golembiewski, Boudreau, Munzenrider, & Luo, 1996; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Melamed et al., 1999; Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 1993). Only a limited number of studies have examined the association between burnout and alcohol consumption (Burke, 1994; Kleiber, Enzmann, & Gusy, 1998; Nowack & Pentkowski, 1994). Kleiber and colleagues (1998), for example, found a positive relationship between two domains of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization) and increased alcohol consumption among a sample of human service employees. Nowack and Pentkowski (1994) found a modest correlation between professional women's depersonalization scores and a composite measure of alcohol, cigarette, and drug use. Burke (1994), on the other hand, found no association between alcohol use and any of the burnout dimensions (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment) among a sample of police officers.

Findings from a numerous studies over the last two decades indicate that there is a positive association between various measures of occupational stress and drinking (Crum, Muntaner, Waton, & Anthony, 1995; Harris & Fennell, 1988; Hingson, Mangione, & Barrett, 1981; House, Strecher, Metzner, & Robbins, 1986; Martin, Blum, & Roman, 1992; Ragland, Greiner, Krause, Holman, & Fisher, 1995; Ragland, Greiner, Yen, & Fisher, 2000; Richman,

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