

Peers, public perception influence firefighters against safety equipment

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Credit: Drexel University

Analysis by a team from Drexel University found that firefighters may shun safety gear due to the pressure of living up to their risk-taker

image.

Jennifer Taylor, PhD, associate professor in Drexel's Dornsife School of Public Health and her team, used data from 123 firefighters interviews across the country to determine why they often refrain from using personal [protective equipment](#) (PPE) in [dangerous situations](#). Their work was featured in the *American Journal of Health Behavior*.

What the researchers found through their interviews was that many firefighters feel pressured against using the proper safety gear by older, more experienced co-workers, as well as the public image of a firefighter as a daredevil.

"Our society has a romanticized notion of what firefighters do, which is kill themselves," Anthony, a firefighter of 20-plus years, said in the study. "And we do everything we can in the fire service to reinforce that."

Perception Over Safety

Popular culture certainly falls in line with that view of firefighters. The film "Backdraft" featured a Kurt Russell character who increasingly put himself into dangerous situations, such as charging through a burning house without support—or an SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus). In FX's "Rescue Me," Dennis Leary's character followed suit.

"If firefighters feel that the public expects them to take risks to save other lives and property, firefighters may internalize the belief that getting injured on the job or dying in the line of duty is an expected outcome of work," Taylor explained.

One firefighter in the study with more than 30 years of experience

described the second floor rescue of a woman that he once witnessed.

"He removes his SCBA while he's in the smoky environment and then proceeds to give her air, which, on TV, looks like this sensationally heroic act. Really, it's pure foolishness," the firefighter said. "Even when you're in an aircraft they tell you [to] get yourself oxygen before you help someone else. But because it would look good in the press, he takes his SCBA off ... Now both of them have been exposed exceedingly long compared to how quickly they would have both made it out [had he not wasted his time and air]."

The "Senior Man"

The public's perception isn't the only viewpoint influencing whether firefighters use safety gear. Sometimes pressure comes from within the firehouse.

Firefighting is a profession steeped in tradition and image, Taylor said, so veteran firefighters have certain sway.

"In fire departments across the United States, there is a person in the department known as the 'senior man,'" Taylor explained. "This is not necessarily an officer, but a highly experienced and long-serving firefighter who everyone regards. His storytelling about past lessons learned can make a huge impression on how recruits look at the job."

According to the study, the opinions of veterans can be set against some of the things younger firefighters learned in their fire academy training.

"When I started as a firefighter—I mean, my experience was that you got frowned on for wearing your breathing apparatus," said Jake, a firefighter with more than 30 years of experience. "[They said,] 'Come on, don't be a sissy, you don't need that.'"

Although the SCBAs were relatively new when Jake began firefighting, other interviews confirmed there are still some particularly lax attitudes toward the packs—especially during overhaul.

Overhaul is the period when the main fire is extinguished but more work needs to be done to prevent fire hidden in walls or other areas from spreading. Many firefighters don't use their breathing apparatus at that point, even though smoke and other carcinogens remain in the air. This can be the result of peer pressure but also out of a desire to finish the task unimpeded.

Goal Seduction

The desire to achieve goals or finish tasks is a strong factor in the use of [safety equipment](#), the researchers found. Termed "goal seduction," personal protective equipment is often viewed as a detriment to it.

Firefighters told the Drexel team that wearing packs during overhaul is hot and cumbersome, so they often take it off. One firefighter also described never wearing the chinstrap for his helmet.

"It's easier for me to pull my helmet off and ... look up or whatever," said Xavier, a 20-plus year veteran of the fire service.

Safety Gear Proponents

Ultimately, Taylor and the other researchers determined that two factors worked in favor of using the safety equipment: individual will and organizational solidarity.

Between training and personal knowledge of the injury or illness that could arise from not using the right equipment, some firefighters had the wherewithal to refuse peer pressure against using the safety equipment.

"If you're going to make fun of me, you're going to make fun of me," said Kate, a 33-year-old [firefighter](#) with less than 10 years on the job. "But I'm not going to use an inhaler later on in life."

Leading by example was particularly effective, according to the interviews. When use of safety equipment became a team-wide commitment, it made the interviewed firefighters more cognizant of properly using it and less likely to feel out-of-place.

"Organizational solidarity can do a lot to help recruits follow protective equipment standard operating procedures," Taylor said. "If the overall gestalt of the group is to protect themselves from the known hazards of the job, then most people in the group will follow that behavior."

The Tug of War

All of this sets off a tug-of-war between firefighters' image/the desire to accomplish goals (termed goal seduction) and personal will to remain safe/the team's desire to remain safe.

To win that tug-of-war, Taylor and her team believe more emphasis by firehouse administration must be placed on creating a culture of safety—which starts with the use of personal protective equipment.

To assist with that, the Fire Department Safety Officers Association (FDSOA) and the Firefighter Injury Research and Safety Trends (FIRST) organization, which Taylor heads, received a \$1.5 million grant funded by FEMA for training 100 safety officers to make them champions of safety in their firehouses across the country. Additionally, the grant will fund new surveys of approximately 500 fire departments to better understand barriers to [safety](#) culture.

This research also doesn't just apply to firehouses. It provides some

insight that could be utilized by other "high-hazard" industries where [personal protective equipment](#) is crucial.

"Our study is really about understanding how all the factors—comfort, fit, beliefs—come together in the organizational environment," Taylor said. "There needs to be the gear, the knowledge and also the organizational support for a positive environment of protection."

More information: "Situational Pressures that Influence Firefighters' Decision Making About Personal Protective Equipment: A Qualitative Analysis," [DOI: 10.5993/AJHB.40.5.2](https://doi.org/10.5993/AJHB.40.5.2)

Provided by Drexel University

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