

# Whistleblowers often suffer from severe psychological problems

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Whistleblowers play a very important and indispensable role in society. However the effects of blowing the whistle on whistleblowers are dramatic, according to a new empirical study of Tilburg University. About 80% report very negative effects on work and wages, and almost 50% very negative effects on family life. About 45% suffer from clinical levels of mental health problems such as anxiety and/or depressive symptoms.

These are the main outcomes of a study among 27 Dutch whistleblowers, i.e. people who blew the whistle about a case of misconduct, and eventually reported the misconduct outside the organization (such as an inspection agency or media) because their complaints had no effects (besides for instance retaliations). To gain insight in the relative prevalence of mental [health](#) problems among whistleblowers, we compared them with matched controls, people with work disabilities, cancer patients, people without physical diseases, and a representative sample of the Dutch population. Whistleblowers were invited via the Expert Group Whistleblowers in the Netherlands and the (formerly) Advice Point Whistleblowers.

## Mental health problems

The prevalence of mental health problems among whistleblowers is about six times higher than among matched controls. The prevalence is comparable with the prevalence of mental health problems two to three

weeks post-disaster among Dutch residents affected by a major disaster. In addition, about half of the whistleblowers used [mental health services](#) in the past 12 months. Results furthermore showed that recent whistleblowers did not differ in symptom levels from those who blew the whistle many years ago. This suggests that many whistleblowers suffer from chronic mental health problems.

## Professional support

The results indicate the importance of adequate and professional support for whistleblowers. It should be prevented that whistleblowers "pay the price" for revealing misconduct, while society benefits from their actions.

This is the first (international) comparative study among whistleblowers on [mental health problems](#) using validated questionnaires. Results are in line with previous research showing that many [whistleblowers](#) suffer from the negative effects of blowing the whistle.

The research has just been published in *Psychological Reports*.

**More information:** Peter G. van der Velden et al. Mental Health Problems Among Whistleblowers: A Comparative Study, *Psychological Reports* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0033294118757681](https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294118757681)

Provided by Tilburg University

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