



Impact of Fly-in Fly-out on the Family Dynamics of Male Miners

What this research is about

In the 1960s, the expansion of the oil and mining industries in Canada increased employment opportunities in these areas. The surge in employees in these traditionally male-dominated fields, located in remote areas, needed a different kind of work schedule. It was too expensive to build permanent communities, so the fly-in fly-out (FIFO) method of commuting was adopted by many employers. FIFO workers spend anywhere from 14 to 21 days on-site, with work shifts being up to 12 hours long, before being sent home for seven days to two weeks of rest. This method of working splits the lives of FIFO workers into separate family and work spheres, which can have personal, emotional, and family consequences.

This study examined the perceived impact on family dynamics that working a FIFO job has on the lives of men in the remote mining industry in Quebec.

What the researchers did

Twenty-two male participants were recruited for this study, which was part of a larger study examining the living conditions of FIFO workers. Participants were recruited through social media, letters, and word of mouth. Twenty participants were between the ages of 18 and 54, and two were over 54 years old. Most participants were married or in a relationship (68%), with one or more children. Sixteen of them worked underground in the mines and six worked outdoors.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews included questions about the impact of FIFO on their personal lives, how FIFO affected their relationships with friends and family, and how FIFO affected the wellbeing of anyone in the family, if any.

What you need to know

The oil and mining industries have always been traditionally male-dominated fields. Expansion in these remote work areas in the 1960s required employers to adopt a different kind of work shift: the fly-in fly-out (FIFO) method. This involves work shifts lasting two to three weeks on site, with seven days to two weeks at home. This type of arrangement can have consequences for the personal and family lives of FIFO workers, as it requires them to split their work and family lives into separate spheres.

This study looked at how this type of work affected the family dynamics of a group of men working in the remote mining industry in Quebec, Canada. Most of these men reported knowing of or experiencing several negative outcomes. These included spousal infidelity, missing family events like birthdays, feeling disconnected from their children, and difficulties adapting to routines at home after returning from a shift. Protective factors were also revealed. Good communication and trust between spouses and being an active, involved father at home, were seen as providing resilience against negative effects.

The researchers used the phenomenological paradigm framework for data analysis. This approach focuses on understanding how people experience events in their life and obtain meanings from their own perspectives. The interview data were coded, and the codes were then categorized thematically. Topics were assigned to the categories, which allowed for comparison between the participants' responses.

What the researchers found

Working a FIFO job can have repercussions on the work-life balance of men, as well as their families. The men interviewed in this study felt like they live two distinct lives, one at work and one at home. The long period at work and a change in routine were obstacles. Some men reported that two weeks off was not enough time to adjust back to their home life. Others felt disconnected from their children and household routines after being away for long periods. Missing important family events, such as birthdays or Christmas, was seen as a sort of sacrifice they had to make in order to provide for the family.

Another obstacle was the maintenance of, or starting, a romantic relationship. Distance relationships could make resolving issues more difficult. Some men mentioned that they had witnessed or experienced infidelity or the breakup of a marriage. For men who were single, FIFO work could make meeting someone and establishing a long-term relationship challenging.

The study did find several protective factors for good family dynamics. For some participants, being in a stable relationship with their spouse/partner helped them and their family have better ability to withstand the disruptive FIFO schedule. Good communication and trust between partners were seen as keys to maintaining a stable relationship, as well as a resilient attitude on the part of the spouse. Another protective factor was being an active, involved parent when they were home, as well as contributing to helping run the household. This way, the men felt less like they were “visitors” in their own home.

How you can use this research

This study suggests several ways that social work can intervene to improve the lives and dynamics of FIFO families. Improved access to childcare services, as well as domestic services during the absence of FIFO workers, could help reduce stress and pressure for the partner at home. Better internet infrastructure at FIFO work sites to help maintain contact between family members could result in better communication and more stable relationships. Implementing a visitation system for families at FIFO work sites could lower employee absences and improve work-life balance.

Education about the realities of FIFO life for prospective employees and their families could result in a lower employee turnover.

About the researchers

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Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

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