Harassment and Discrimination in the FEMA Workplace

TOP-LINE RESULTS FROM THE WORKPLACE SURVEY SUPPORT STUDY
In the spring of 2019, at the request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) fielded a survey designed to estimate the annual prevalence of workplace harassment and discrimination at FEMA and to assess employee perceptions of leadership and workplace climate. To yield the most-meaningful and -useful data on the types of civil rights violations that FEMA employees experience, the survey assessed gender-based/sexual harassment, gender discrimination, racial/ethnic harassment, and racial/ethnic discrimination. Civil rights violation is an umbrella term that includes harassment and discrimination on the basis of membership in any protected class.

All 19,917 FEMA personnel were invited to participate, and 8,946 completed the survey (44.9-percent response rate). Responses were weighted to represent the FEMA population. The survey results (highlights of which are contained in this brief) reveal areas in need of improvement and will help guide FEMA leadership decisions about programming and policy responses.
Civil rights violations were common in the FEMA workforce.

Estimated percentage of FEMA employees who were categorized as experiencing a sex- or race/ethnicity-based civil rights violation in the past year*

* A respondent was categorized as having experienced a civil rights violation if their survey answers indicated that someone from work had engaged in (1) harassing behavior that offended the respondent and was either persistent or severe or (2) behavior perceived as discriminatory that caused a workplace harm. Survey items were formulated with simple and behaviorally specific language (see Coreen Farris, Carra S. Sims, Terry L. Schell, Miriam Matthews, Sierra Smucker, Samantha Cohen, and Owen Hall, Harassment and Discrimination on the Basis of Gender and Race/Ethnicity in the FEMA Workforce, HSOAC operated by the RAND Corporation, 2020). This classification treats the survey respondents’ answers as accurate. An independent investigation of respondents’ experiences could reveal that some people had experienced civil rights violations even though they had not been categorized as having done so and that others who had been categorized as experiencing violations had not.
Twenty percent of FEMA employees were categorized as having experienced gender-based or sexual civil rights violations in the past year.

Estimated percentage of FEMA employees who experienced gender-based or sexual civil rights violations in the past year, by gender and overall.
Approximately one in five FEMA employees were categorized as having experienced racial/ethnic civil rights violations in the past year.

- 2 OR MORE RACES: 28.5%
- AFRICAN AMERICAN: 23.1%
- ASIAN: 20.9%
- HISPANIC: 18.5%
- WHITE: 15.9%
- OVERALL: 18.4%

Estimated percentage of FEMA employees who were categorized as having experienced racial/ethnic harassment or discrimination in the past year.
RECOMMENDATION
Ensure that prevention efforts address all types of problematic behaviors.
RISK VARIES BY OFFICE

Rates of civil rights violations varied across offices. For example, women in Mission Support and the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) were less likely to be categorized as having experienced gender-based/sexual harassment than women in many other offices. Similarly, the estimated rate of racial/ethnic harassment was lower in Mission Support and the Office of the CFO than in some other offices.

Gender-Based/Sexual Harassment: Risk, by Organizational Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL OFFICES</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICE OF THE ADMINISTRATOR</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEDERAL INSURANCE AND MITIGATION ADMINISTRATION</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICE OF RESPONSE AND RECOVERY</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESILIENCE</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISSION SUPPORT</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICE OF THE CFO</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Excluding the Office of the CFO, which was large enough to describe separately.
2 Excluding the Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration, which was large enough to describe separately.

RECOMMENDATION

Explore differences in culture and climate between offices that had low rates of civil rights violations and offices that had higher rates.
SOME EMPLOYEES MISTRUST LEADERSHIP

Despite the majority of FEMA employees saying that leaders would respond appropriately to harassing behaviors, a fairly substantial proportion perceived leadership behaviors as neutral, at best, and perhaps actively harmful. FEMA employees’ perceptions of their direct supervisors’ responses to sexual and racial/ethnic harassment were consistently more positive than their perceptions of senior-level FEMA leaders’ responses.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure that leaders at all levels understand their responsibility to address harassment and discrimination.
For example, 24 percent of women indicated that they were neutral about, disagreed with, or strongly disagreed with a statement that their supervisors would report sexual harassment to the right FEMA authority, while approximately 28 percent of African American respondents had similar opinions about how their supervisors would handle racial/ethnic harassment.

Approximately 40 percent of women and 40 percent of African American respondents expressed similar sentiments about senior leaders.
REPORTING DECISIONS SUGGEST THAT BARRIERS EXIST

Only one-third to one-half of FEMA employees who had experiences consistent with harassment or discrimination in the preceding year had reported the incident to a supervisor or manager or through another official channel. A similar proportion shared their experiences informally. But one-tenth to one-fifth told no one.
The top three barriers to reporting

• Employee “did not think anything would be done” about it

• Employee wanted to “forget about it and move on”

• Employee was afraid of being “labeled as a troublemaker”

Many common barriers to reporting could be alleviated by ensuring that leaders at all levels of the agency know what to do with reports and have the tools to take action. Supervisors should also be held accountable for how they handle reports and for managing concerns about retaliation.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Reduce barriers to reporting. To start, ensure that leaders have the knowledge and tools to respond appropriately to reports and will work to prevent retaliation.
EMPLOYEES NEED LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

For those who reported discrimination, most were either neutral about or dissatisfied with FEMA’s response to the complaint. This could be because they perceived that leaders took no action in response to reports of discrimination.

THE EMPLOYEE WAS ENCOURAGED TO DROP THE ISSUE

40% of those reporting gender discrimination

42.1% of those reporting racial/ethnic discrimination

THE PERSON THE EMPLOYEE TOLD HAD TAKEN NO ACTION TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION

39.6% of those who reported gender discrimination

34.2% of those who reported racial/ethnic discrimination
Many employees who report harassment or discrimination experience retaliation

- 27% or more of those who reported racial/ethnic harassment
- 30% or more of those who reported gender-based/sexual harassment
- 35% or more of those who reported gender discrimination
- 46% or more of those who reported racial/ethnic discrimination

Percentage of employees who reported behavior and were then subject to retaliation

**RECOMMENDATION**

At all levels of leadership, to foster employee trust in the system, increase accountability and transparency in dealing with harassment and discrimination reports.
PERCEPTIONS OF WORK ENVIRONMENT VARY

In general, men had more-positive perceptions of the work environment at FEMA than women did. This was true for perceptions of supervisor and FEMA leader response to sexual harassment and of the general work environment climate. In addition, African American employees tended to have less positive perceptions of the climate for racial/ethnic harassment and the general work environment climate than white or Hispanic employees had.
RECOMMENDATION

Continue monitoring harassment and discrimination in the workforce.

Surveying employees again after time has elapsed will allow FEMA to assess the impact of intervention measures and to monitor progress in reducing prevalence rates and barriers to reporting, improving perceptions of its leadership, and publicly and transparently engaging its workforce.

Conclusion

Changing organizational culture and climate is no easy task. A comprehensive and holistic set of interventions that incentivize professional and respectful workplace behavior can help leaders ensure that proclivities toward negative behavior are suppressed in the FEMA work environment.
This brief describes research conducted within the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) and documented in Harassment and Discrimination on the Basis of Gender and Race/Ethnicity in the FEMA Workforce, by Coreen Farris, Carra S. Sims, Terry L. Schell, Miriam Matthews, Sierra Smucker, Samantha Cohen, and Owen Hall, HSOAC operated by the RAND Corporation, 2020 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA383-1). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA383-1. HSOAC is a federally funded research and development center operated by the RAND Corporation under contract with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The results presented here do not necessarily reflect official DHS opinion or policy. For more information on HSOAC, see www.rand.org/hsoac.

www.rand.org

PHOTO CREDITS: Cover: FEMA photo by K.C. Wilsey; page 8: DHS photo by Tara A. Molle