

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

# Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector

Burnout, Public Service, and the  
Search for Compassionate  
Organizations

WILLIAM HATCHER  
AND WESLEY L. MEARES

ROUTLEDGE



# Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector

After decades of attacks on the bureaucracy and recent efforts by political leaders to undermine democracy, public servants are tired, burned out, and questioning the value of public service. This is the first book dedicated to exploring public administration's knowledge of the work-life balance relationship, offering actionable strategies to create healthier, more compassionate workplaces that enhance individual well-being and organizational performance.

*Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector* draws on data from a survey focused on work-life balance and burnout administered to city managers working in U.S. cities with populations of 10,000 or more people. It defines key concepts and analyzes case studies, offering evidence-based solutions rooted in the Demand-Control-Support model and the compassionate management model. Readers will gain insights into the causes and consequences of burnout, learn how to foster workplace harmony, and access practical tools to build caring organizations that support employee well-being and democratic governance. This book is designed for public administrators, policymakers, organizational leaders, scholars, and students in public administration, management, and related fields. It is particularly relevant for those seeking to understand and address the challenges of burnout and work-life balance in public sector workplaces.

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# **Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector**

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**William Hatcher and  
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**To Jessica, Theo, and Ella. Your love and support at home  
helps me remember what work is for.**

**—Will  
Augusta, Georgia  
December 2025**

**To Sarah, Brayden, Logan (Turtle), and Camden. Your  
love and support carried me through this endeavor.**

**—Wes  
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# 1 Introduction to Work-Life Balance and Burnout in the Public Sector

In recent years, the increased threats to public employees have placed significant stress on these workers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health officials became a targeted group of an often violent and threatening public (Ward et al., 2022). Additionally, election workers in the U.S. have faced significant public pressure as well as threats of violence (Sullivan, 2024) due to often baseless attacks on election security. After decades of attacks on the bureaucracy and recent efforts by political leaders to undermine democracy and expertise, public servants are tired, burned out, and questioning the value of public service. Simultaneously, the medical community, public health experts, and organizational scholars are building solid cases identifying work-related burnout as a serious health concern. We know that workplace burnout negatively hinders organizational performance (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004), decreases workplace happiness (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2016), and harms the health and well-being of employees (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001), which has led the World Health Organization to declare burnout as a health syndrome that needs to be addressed (WHO, 2019).

News, popular media, academia, and the public in general recognize burnout's adverse effects. For instance, in academic scholarship, Moss (2021) published *The Burnout Epidemic*, in which she presents evidence of burnout across sectors and makes a case for organizational change to help address burnout. Pope-Ruark (2022) has written an excellent book focusing on identifying burnout among faculty and discussing solutions to gain "renewal." And the formative researcher on burnout, Christine Maslach, recently published a new book on the topic, *The Burnout Challenge* (Maslach & Leiter, 2022), which covers the scholarly findings and provides updated solutions to the problem.

Numerous podcasts focus solely on burnout (for example, *Fried: The Burnout Podcast*), and they often include possible solutions, with many not necessarily rooted in scholarly evidence. Additionally, there are copious podcasts focused on work-life balance. For instance, the widely read and cited organizational psychologist Adam Grant's original podcast was titled

## 2 *Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector*

*WorkLife*. Daily news stories catalog how individuals throughout the world are struggling with burnout. Before and after the pandemic, workers tell their employers that burnout and work-life balance are top issues of concern (Risher, 2018). Furthermore, concern and curiosity about burnout and work-life balance show up in Google searches of words, which have increased over the past decade, accelerating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, college students express that they are burned out and suffering from anxiety and depression. For instance, recent polling showed that 58% of college students reported feeling burned out (June, 2024). Moreover, while recent applied research and surveys have found burnout among public employees to be decreasing, the problem is still one of the most significant issues facing the public sector workplace (Newhouse, 2024). Work-life balance is often the solution given to the problem of employee burnout, but ensuring healthy workplaces is more complex. Maintaining work-life balance or harmony requires consideration of the overall health of the public workplace—in particular, how we address burnout.

However, a search of the major journals in the field of public administration returned few scientific studies examining burnout. Research by Golembiewski and colleagues (1998) is probably the most comprehensive on the topic of burnout, but this work is a few decades old. Other research in the field focuses on relations between management and employees (Marvel, 2017) and employee motivation (Bakker, 2015). The literature on work-life balance in public administration is more developed than studies dedicated solely to burnout. Studies have focused on the importance of governments in Europe supporting work-life balance (Den et al., 2013), sustainable balance in U.S. federal law enforcement (Yu, 2019), promoting work-life balance in the classroom (Hatcher & McDonald, 2022), and work-life balance in the public bureaucracy of other nations (Yang & Islam, 2021). Still, there needs to be a comprehensive volume detailing the relationship between work-life balance or imbalance and burnout. This book seeks to extend public administration's knowledge of this relationship and serve as a book dedicated to finding harmony in the public workplace.

### **Goals of the Book**

To accomplish this goal and contribute to the scholarly literature and public administration practice, the book defines work-life balance; reviews the literature in multiple fields, such as medicine, public health, management, social work, psychology, education, and political science; and aligns this literature to develop a theory of work-life balance in the public sector. The book collects data from a work-life balance and burnout survey administered to city managers working in U.S. cities with 10,000 or more people. The book also presents case studies of public agencies that promote work-life balance and

practice the principles of caring organizations. Lastly, the book uses these data to revise the theory of work-life balance for public administration and specify lessons learned to help public administrators create work environments that promote healthy living.

We argue that the book advances public administration scholarship in the following ways:

1. Constructs a work-life balance theory specific to public administration and the public workplace.
2. Incorporates in more detail the theory of work-life balance, which has been studied in management and other disciplines, into public administration.
3. Presents novel primary data on how a key group of public administrators (i.e., city managers/administrators) view work-life balance, burnout, and compassionate organizations.
4. Details cases of public agencies that promote work-life balance and cases of public agencies that struggle with employee burnout. From this storytelling of burnout and balance, we develop solutions to the problem for the public workplace.
5. Refines the theory of work-life balance in the public sector that can be used to guide future research, teaching, and practice.

### **Burnout, Work-Life Balance, and Public Administration**

The extensive literature on occupational burnout and attempts to understand work-life balance will be cataloged in Chapter 2. However, for this chapter, we would like to provide operational definitions of occupational burnout and work-life balance to provide a common discussion point throughout the book. First, occupational burnout has been studied significantly from the 1970s onward, with Christine Maslach being the foremost scholar (Maslach et al., 1997). As noted by Edú-Valsania and colleagues (2022), this “operational definition of burnout” by Maslach and Jackson includes it as “a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of professional efficacy” (1981, p. 2). As one of us discussed in a *Public Voices* essay (Hatcher, 2020), the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definition of burnout is based on Maslach’s operationalization and research. Furthermore, the WHO has labeled burnout an occupational syndrome affecting workers’ health.

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or