


# Chapter 1

## Crisis Epidemiology of Burnout Syndrome in the US Virgin Islands’ Government: The Consequences of COVID–19

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In recent decades, studies have continued to explore burnout syndrome within various professions. However, there are limited studies on occupational burnout syndrome as an epidemic. Occupational burnout epidemic considers burnout syndrome as a large-scale spread of an occupational disease that impacts employees’ health, welfare and performance at a particular period. In the realm of the public sector, there is a need for epidemiological studies on occupational burnout epidemics, specifically in the scope of disasters and crises and US territorial governments. Therefore, this chapter presents a research study on a burnout epidemic that affected the government workforce of the US Virgin Islands (USVI) during COVID-19. An exploratory mixed method design was used to gather empirical evidence. Data was collected from 201 participants working in nine departments/agencies of USVI government. The findings of this research uncovered identifiable symptoms of burnout syndrome experienced by USVI government workers during COVID-19 pandemic.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed the world, every government was burdened by guaranteeing societal survivability, resilience and stability (Mazzucato & Kattel, 2020). Globally, governments shared in the Herculean task of designing, operationalizing and implementing effective emergency public health responses (i.e., access to vaccine, diagnostics, dissemination of information, and quarantining), in tandem with providing necessary public services to citizens. However, the carrying out effective COVID responses and public services fell into the hands of the government employees to achieve. Government employees were put in a position of “self-sacrifice” and “extraordinary humanness” in their workplaces (Park & Ahn, 2022, p. 15). Unfortunately, the pandemic took a severe toll on all government employees. Park and Ahn (2022) confirmed government employees' susceptibility to COVID pandemic and the shocking death rates. COVID also created greater work, socioeconomic and emotional hardships (Barboza-Wilkes et al., 2024).

Specifically, COVID-19 placed this important workforce in the direct cross hairs of burnout. Burnout is often viewed simply as a simple stress of work environments. It is regularly mistaken as specific to frontline professional fields and specialties (i.e., Medical and Health). Burnout is also repeatedly examined solely on a case-by-case basis. However, burnout is a complex and concerning occupational phenomenon that can severely impact all government employees, regardless of position, profession, field or levels of government. To this matter, burnout should be conceptualized as an epidemiological topic. From an epidemiological standpoint, burnout should be studied as a large-scale occurrence or epidemic within the public sector, especially at the local levels of government amid disasters and crises. Specifically, research on burnout as an epidemic within territorial governments is crucial. Territorial governments and its employees are often overlooked by research and excluded by scholarly and governmental discussions. However, territorial governments have greater responsibilities to provide adequate and immediate direct response to their citizens in instances of remoteness, isolation and inaccessibility.

This chapter provides literary context to public sector occupational burnout syndrome as an epidemic of crisis. This work also explores burnout epidemic within a territorial government based on real experiences of government employees in the US Virgin Islands (USVI) during the COVID pandemic. The USVI is a territory of the United States. It is located in the Caribbean region. It consists of four islands (i.e., St. Thomas, St. John, St. Croix and Water Island). It is roughly 2700 km from the US mainland. Due to its geographic location, the USVI government faces the sole responsibility of providing immediate emergency responses. COVID-19 was a prime instance of this. COVID-19 greatly threatened the health, well-being and overall safety of citizens living on these islands as the territory's economy (VIOMB,

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