

Beyond Harmful Behaviour Bias

Targeting Upstream Psychosocial Risks to Reduce Harm

November 2025



Beyond Harmful Behaviour Bias: Targeting Upstream Psychosocial Risks to Reduce Harm

Workers' compensation data is often used to identify leading causes of psychological injury in Australia. However, the way the system classifies claims tends to **overstate** the role of harmful behaviours **like bullying** and **harassment**.

These behaviours are damaging and unacceptable, but in most cases they're **not** the **primary cause** of harm, rather they're the **outcome** of a complex web of psychosocial risk factors.

In this paper we outline the **limitations of the workers compensation system**, why it **inflates** the role of bullying and harassment in causing workplace harm, and how we can move towards **better insights** via next generation data analysis.

Contents

- 03

The Limits of the Workers' Compensation Data System

Examines how the workers' compensation system's single-cause approach distorts psychosocial risk data, highlighting how deeper systemic factors are overlooked.
- 04

How Awareness Shapes Reporting

Explores how employees' greater awareness of bullying and harassment shapes reporting patterns.
- 05

Moving Toward More Accurate Insights

Reveals that bullying and harassment stem from deeper organisational factors, with upstream risks like unfairness and high demands driving most psychological harm.
- 07

Organisational and Industry Benefits

Explores how next-generation tools like Mibo enable organisations to identify and address upstream risks, helping prevent harm and create healthier, more effective workplaces.



The Limits of the Workers' Compensation Data System

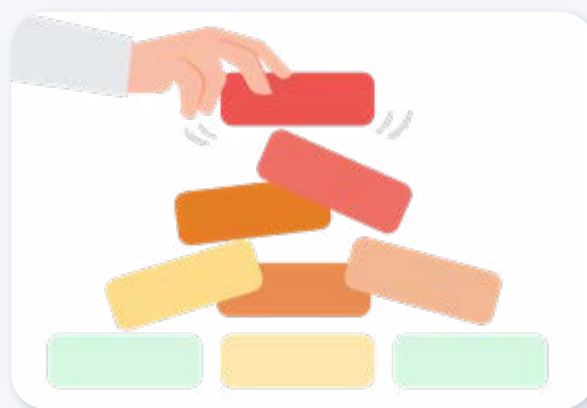
The workers' compensation system requires the assignment of a **single mechanism** to each injury. Injury managers must choose from a **narrow list** of factors, such as bullying, harassment, or work pressure, that does not capture the **full range** of workplace psychosocial hazards.

This process oversimplifies complex realities.

Psychological harm rarely stems from just one factor. Instead, it almost always emerges from the interaction of multiple risks over time. Yet, because the framework requires attribution to only one category, the factor that is last in the chain of contributors, most recognised by the system, or easiest to classify, often becomes the 'cause.'

In many cases, these behaviours are not the root problem but rather the 'final straw' in a long chain of unaddressed stressors.

By reducing multi-causal outcomes into one-dimensional categories, the system creates an over representation of downstream harmful behaviours like bullying and harassment, while upstream hazards that more powerfully contribute to harm remain under-recognised.



The result is a distorted picture of risk that shapes regulatory priorities and, in turn, biases organisational focus toward exposure to harmful behaviours rather than addressing more fundamental causal factors.

This typically leads to controls focusing narrowly on awareness training and reporting by defining harmful behaviours, telling people not to commit them, and outlining reporting pathways. Yet they rarely address the organisational and relational conditions that allow bullying and harassment to develop and persist.



How Awareness Shapes Reporting

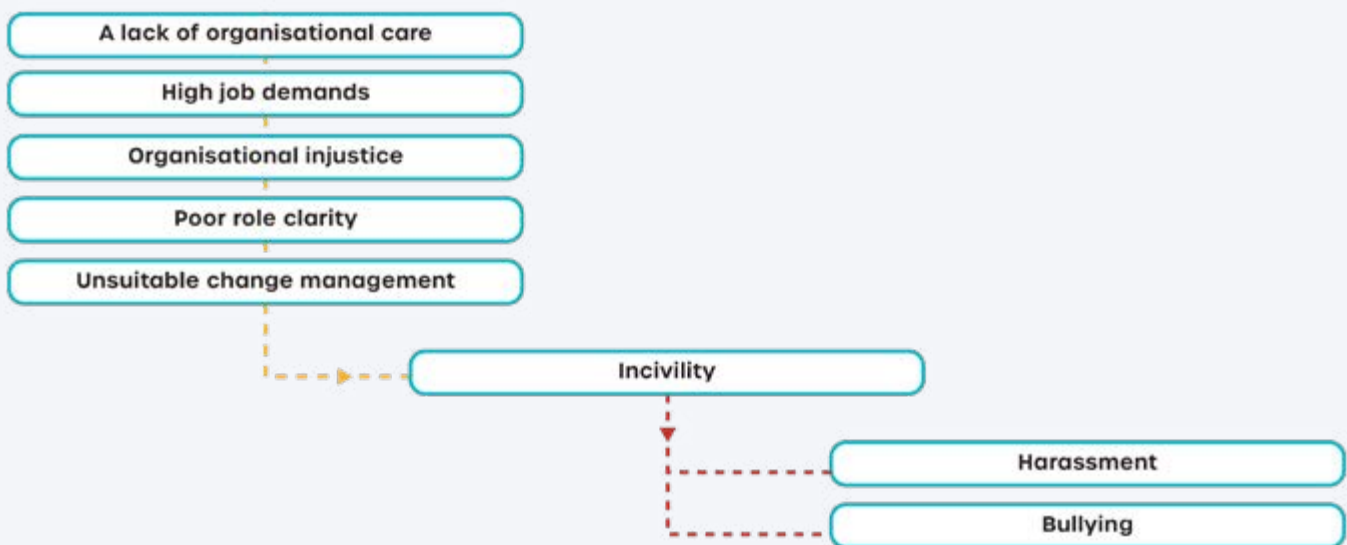
Additionally, today's employees are generally **more familiar** with bullying and harassment than with many other psychosocial hazards that contribute to psychological harm.

Consequently, when harm occurs, they're more likely to attribute it to these factors that are also more readily **recognised and accepted** within the compensation system.

This can obscure the cumulative influence of upstream factors such as:

- A lack of organisational care
- High job demands
- Organisational injustice
- Poor role clarity
- Unsuitable change management

It is **these factors** that often create the conditions in which psychosocial risks grow first into incivility, and **escalate** into what workers **later experience** as bullying or harassment.



A Practical Example

Consider an organisation where psychological health and safety aren't highly valued by senior management. A poorly managed change project is then introduced involving:

- Decisions made without suitable worker consultation, creating a sense of unfairness
- Job demands increasing without additional resources, and
- Leadership instability leading to poor direct leader support

Without adequate organisational care to limit initial hazard exposure, or processes to detect and address upstream risk early, **frustration and fear rise**. Incivility becomes normalised as staff react to stress and uncertainty. Although this behaviour causes a continuous environment of high harm, it is dismissed as 'low-level' and goes unreported.

Over time, the incivility escalates until behaviours are recognised as bullying or harassment. At this point, workers begin lodging compensation claims, which are recorded solely as 'bullying.' Yet the reality is that this was the **culmination of a lack of organisational care**, and months of unmanaged psychosocial risk.

Without those upstream stressors, the issues would not have escalated.

Moving Toward More Accurate Insights

In Australia, the leading mechanism attributed to serious mental health claims is work-related harassment and/or workplace bullying (33.2%), with sexual harassment an additional attribution. These statistics have shaped the public discourse and regulatory agenda, in turn, influencing organisational focus.

However, longitudinal research shows that **Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC)**, the shared organisational perception of policies, practices, and procedures for protecting workers' psychological health, **predicts workplace bullying** over time. **Strengthening PSC**, particularly through improved work design and effective conflict resolution procedures, has been shown to **reduce bullying**.

Further, Professor Michelle Tuckey, a leading Australian researcher on the systemic origins of harmful workplace behaviour, emphasises the importance of understanding organisational systems. Her research demonstrates that **poor job design** and **resource deficits** create conditions where **harm can emerge**, and that people-management practices **strongly predict** exposure to bullying, even beyond established factors such as PSC.

Together, this evidence underscores that harmful interpersonal behaviours are **rarely isolated incidents**, but rather downstream consequences of deeper, long-term organisational conditions.

So what happens when we broaden the workers' compensation lens to include the full spectrum of psychosocial contributors to harm?

Drawing on more than 500,000 data points from the Mibo Psychosocial Risk Management Assessment (PRMA), independently evaluated by the Griffith University RISE Research Centre and recognised for its' high validity and reliability, the picture is clear:

- Other psychosocial work factors are **9.5 times more likely** than bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment to be reported as contributing high or very high harm to mental health.

And when the cumulative impact of the psychosocial environment is explored through advanced data analysis, the story becomes even more compelling:

- **Less than 1%** of workers report high or very high harm from bullying or harassment unless they also report high or very high harm from at least one upstream factor.
- And the likelihood of reporting such harm increases dramatically as upstream risks accumulate: 0.79% chance with no upstream factors, 26.9% chance when there is at least one report of high harm from an upstream factor, 44.9% for at least 3 upstream factors and 57.1% chance when there is at least five upstream factors causing high harm.

Number of upstream factors	Likelihood of reported high bullying or harassment harm
None	0.79%
At least one	26.9%
At least three	44.9%
At least five	57.1%

The pattern indicates bullying and harassment are almost always **the downstream outcomes of broader organisational stressors**.

So which upstream psychosocial factors most **powerfully drive** the occurrence of bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment...identified through Mibo's advanced machine learning analytic techniques that reveal causal, not merely correlational, relationships?

The top five most influential factors:

- Unfairness
- Emotional Demands
- Cognitive Demands
- Productivity Hindrances
- Incivility

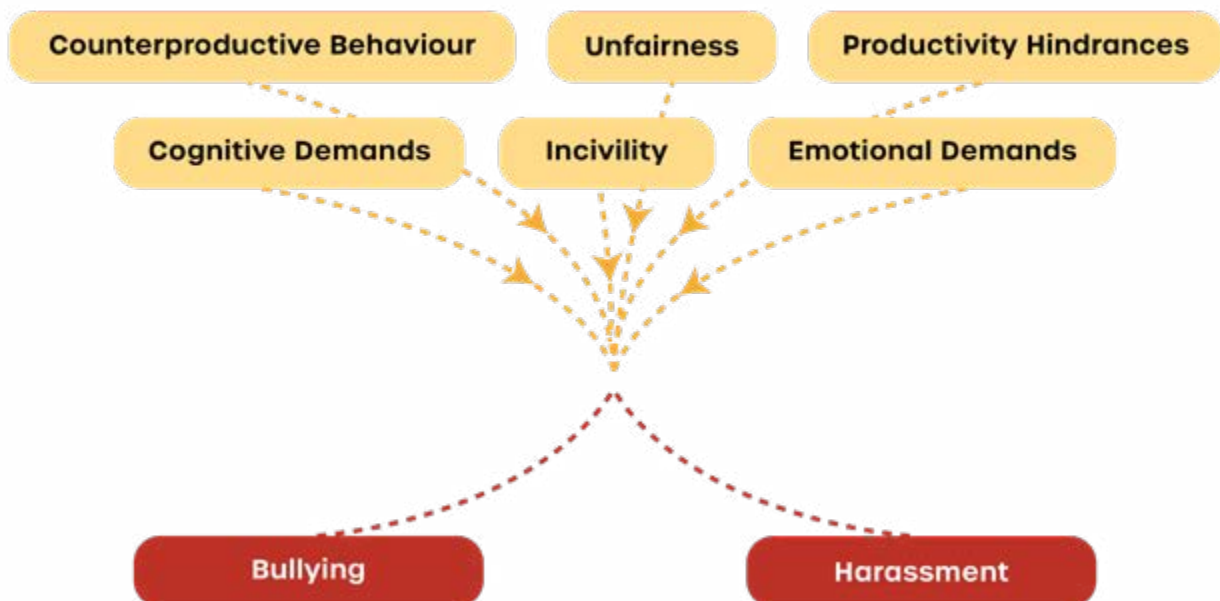
account for 46.44% of the incidence of bullying exposure.

Similarly,

- Unfairness
- Emotional Demands
- Cognitive Demands
- Productivity Hindrances
- Incivility
- Counterproductive Behaviour

together explain 35.05% of the incidence of harassment exposure.

So to meaningfully reduce harmful workplace behaviours, the highest priority should be **addressing these influential upstream work factors**, the root conditions that most powerfully predict bullying and harassment risks downstream.



Organisational and Industry Benefits

The current workers' compensation system **inflates** the perceived proportion of psychological harm attributed to workplace bullying and harassment. While these outcomes must be addressed, effective management requires recognising they are often **symptoms of deeper systemic risks**.

Next-generation tools like Mibo enable organisations to assess and analyse PSC, the cumulative effects of a full range of upstream risks and protective factors, and identify those that most strongly influence downstream harm.

This equips leaders to build a supportive environment that better:

-  Prevents initial hazard exposure
-  Detects and addresses upstream risks early
-  Reduces the likelihood of downstream harmful interpersonal behaviours

For the workers' compensation industry, greater sophistication in data reporting and more effective promotion of preventative approaches are needed. This can help reduce compensation claims and improve return-to-work outcomes through a deeper understanding of causation.

Ultimately, better systems and insights allow both organisations and insurers to **prioritise** and **address what influences harm**, creating healthier workplaces and more effective compensation outcomes.

Authors



Sean Fyfe

Founder,
Managing Director at Mibo



David Burroughs

Chief Mental Health Officer
Westpac, Founder and
Principal Psychologist -
Australian Psychological
Services

Introducing Mibo

Mibo is a **next-generation** Psychosocial Risk Management technology platform helping organisations embrace a rigorous approach to creating supportive psychosocial work environments.

Our solution combines the **Psychosocial Risk Management Assessment (PRMA)**, industry-leading **analysis** and **reporting**, an **advanced Control Measure Module system**, and the leveraging of **emerging technologies** to enhance capability, efficiency, and precision in managing psychosocial risks.

Discover more about Mibo's innovative approach to Psychosocial Risk Management [here](#).



Introducing Australian Psychological Services

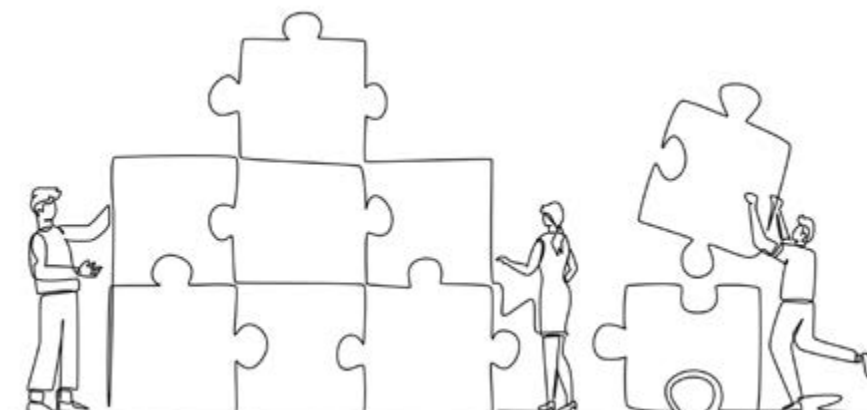
Since 2010, APS has been a **leading provider** of workplace mental health solutions and **specialist psychological services**, both Australia-wide and internationally.

As a specialist psychological consultancy, we provide a **broad range** of workplace mental health and wellbeing solutions, including mental health and wellbeing strategy development, psychosocial risk management services, as well as training and development.

At APS, we believe that good work is good for people and that when we get it right, **work can be a protective factor for mental health**. As such, our approach focuses on the **prevention** of psychological harm but also seeks to promote the **positive elements** of work to improve performance, productivity and create thriving workplaces.

Renowned for our innovation and impact, APS operate through a national and international team of senior psychologists with an emphasis on evidence-informed initiatives that are theoretically robust and highly practical, culminating in our motto “when rigour matters”.

You can learn more about APS services [here](#)



References

Dollard, M. F., Dormann, C., Tuckey, M. R., & Escartín, J. (2017). Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) and enacted PSC for workplace bullying and psychological health problem reduction. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 26(6), 844–857. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2017.1380626>

Tuckey, M. R., Dollard, M. F., & Neall, A. M. (2012). Job demands, resource deficiencies, and workplace harassment: Evidence for micro-level effects. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 19(4), 292–310. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030326>

Tuckey, M. R., & Neall, A. M. (2022). Workplace bullying as an organizational problem: Spotlight on people management practices. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(21), 14256. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114256>

Safe Work Australia. (2025, October). Key Work Health and Safety Statistics Australia 2025. <https://data.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/insights/key-whs-statistics-australia/latest-release>