



Stressors and Motivators Among Professionals Treating Clients Who Have Sexually Abused

Key Findings from the 2025 Survey

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Introduction

Over the past several years, interest in wellness and selfcare has surged among behavioral health professionals. Rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders have skyrocketed. In response, researchers and laypersons alike have increased focus on addressing ways to combat the impact and harmful effects.

In 2021, motivated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Dr. Janet DiGiorgio-Miller](#) and the Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse ([ATSA](#)) conducted an unpublished survey about stress and selfcare among professionals in our field. Two years later, Safer Society followed up with a survey about stress and selfcare ([Prescott, DiGiorgio-Miller, & Haskell, 2023](#)). Findings from these surveys showed that professionals reported high levels of stress and burnout. Referring to the high level of stress experienced by individuals working with clients who have caused sexual harm, the 2023 study concluded that: “Even the best self-care regimens are rarely enough to completely ameliorate the effects of this stress.” Nonetheless, in our daily work, however, we also hear stories of how people thrive and find joy in their work to prevent further sexual abuse among a clientele known to have abused. Many have described becoming more deliberate in their selfcare practices.

Numerous studies have explored vicarious trauma experienced by professionals working with individuals who have sexually abused. However, few studies have explored the role of the workplace in either contributing to stress or creating an environment of wellness. None have looked at stressors such as workplace environment and the moral injury of working in a counter-therapeutic setting. Further, there is little study into what motivates professionals to continue this challenging work. The following survey aimed to address these gaps and provide insights into both the stressors and sources of hope and joy in this field.

The 2025 Workplace Stressors and Motivators Survey

In March 2025, we conducted a survey of 249 professionals who work in the field of treating individuals who have caused sexual harm. The goal was to assess their perceptions of the biggest stressors they face in the workplace and what motivates these professionals to continue doing this difficult work every day.

Respondents ranged in age from their 20s to 80 years old. They reported having treated people who had caused sexual harm for between 4 and 20 years or more. Most respondents (76%) were female. These professionals worked across a variety of settings, including correctional institutions, government agencies, community agencies, and private practice. Approximately 40% of individuals in their 20s were working in a correctional setting, and this consistently declined over age, with only 6% of respondents over 70 years old working in corrections. Conversely, the percentage of respondents working in private practice settings steadily increased with age, from 10% among those in their 20s to 69% among those in their 70s. Most providers worked either on-site or in a hybrid environment.

Workplace Stressors

The survey asked respondents to identify their top three of nine listed workplace stressors. The listed stressors included:

- Workplace leadership/management
- Inability to change systemic issues
- Processing traumatic details of the offenses
- Limited career development opportunities
- Lack of professional support networks
- Interagency collaboration difficulties
- Job security
- Challenging interactions with colleagues
- Exposure to disturbing visual material

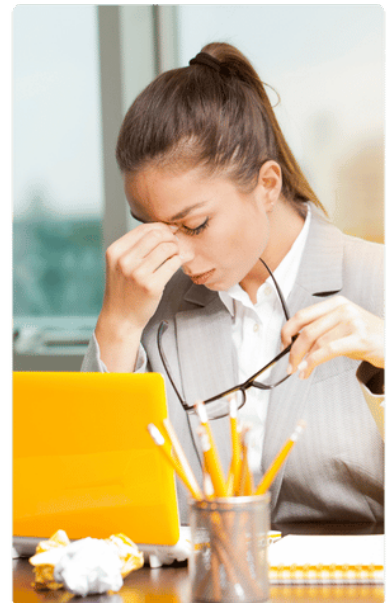
Respondents were also given an opportunity to comment on their experiences.

Inability to Change Systemic Issues

Regardless of the competence of the individual professional, there are systemic issues that limit the effectiveness of treatment, rehabilitation, and support efforts. These include:

- Societal stigma and negative public attitudes towards those who sexually offend, which influence policy and available resources
- Legal frameworks that make it difficult for professionals to implement evidence-based practices that promote healing and reduce recidivism
- Internal biases and institutional cultures within treatment programs, justice systems, and social service agencies

These systemic issues only make it more difficult for professionals to provide effective, compassionate treatment. It's no wonder that the most significant stressor identified across every age group was an



inability to change systemic issues (66%). This was higher for younger respondents, with 80% reporting this to be a top stressor as compared with 63–69% of individuals in other age groups.

Conclusion: The inability to change systemic issues in this field means that even the most experienced and dedicated professionals are restricted by organizational, legal, and societal frameworks. Throughout their career, professionals find themselves emotionally drained and unsupported, facing a lack of empathy from the very structures that should be aiding them in making lasting change for their clients. As we see from the survey results, many young, idealistic professionals enter this field wanting to make a change; frustration with the challenges of doing so may soften—although not go away entirely—over time.

Workplace Leadership/Management

Individuals in roles such as supervisor, program director, or administrative leaders are responsible for shaping the culture, policies, support systems, and work conditions within an organization. These workplace leaders set direction, make decisions, and manage daily operations within treatment programs, agencies, and correctional settings. The impact of these roles on professionals includes:

- Providing resources for quality care
- Shaping response to ethical dilemmas and crisis management
- Influencing emotional wellbeing and burnout prevention
- Managing workloads and approaches to collaborative care

Given the significant influence of workplace leadership and management on a day-to-day basis, it is not surprising that this was a key stressor for professionals in the field. Overall, 46% of respondents identified workplace leadership/management as a top stressor. Half of the respondents in their 30s and 40s further



identified problems with workplace leadership and management. This dipped slightly for professionals in mid-life but rose again to 50% for professionals in their 70s.

The comments from survey respondents provide a glimpse into the challenges encountered in this line of work. Specifically, respondents indicated that upper management within treatment programs is distanced from client care, resulting in decisions that may not reflect the realities of the work. This

disconnect is what leads to workplace politics, leaving those who provide the care to clients feeling their experiences and insights are undervalued, and their voices are not considered.

Conclusion: Workplace leadership and management play a central role in shaping the professional experience. They influence staff engagement, job satisfaction, and overall quality of care. Given that it was consistently identified as a leading stressor across career stages, further study with a larger and more diverse sample is needed to determine whether these trends hold, explore potential explanations, and guide development of practices that better support professionals in the field.

Interagency Collaboration Difficulties

Working with professionals across different agencies and organizations—such as treatment providers, probation and parole officers, law enforcement, social workers, and victim advocacy centers—relies on a number of factors to be successful. However, it is easy to find challenges, such as:

- Difficulties coordinating efforts and maintaining clear and timely communications due to agency protocols and priorities
- Differences in goals and expectations between agencies (which can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication)
- Disagreements over responsibilities, confidentiality, or the best approach to supervision and treatment of the client
- Varying levels of experience, resources, and training
- Sharing sensitive client information due to legal barriers and ethical concerns

Difficulties with inter-agency collaboration was the third most frequently identified contributor to workplace stress and frustration. The challenges of collaborating with other agencies seem to be more stressful for those in their 30s, with 44% identifying this as a top stressor. Professionals over 50 tended to cite other, more pressing stressors in their comments.

Conclusion: For professionals, these difficulties can create feelings of frustration when collaborative efforts with outside agencies do not meet client needs. While those with more experience may develop more effective ways to navigate these challenges, these ongoing stressors remain present throughout a career. Organizational commitment to more inter-agency meetings, clear communication protocols, and training on continuity of care are important first steps towards fostering a more sustainable—and less stressful—collaboration.

Processing Traumatic Details of the Offense

There are significant emotional and psychological challenges professionals face when exposed to the details of sexual offenses during assessment, treatment, and supervision of individuals who have sexually harmed others. Professionals often listen to explicit descriptions of abusive acts and work through the impacts of those offenses with the clients.

Responses to the survey suggest that younger professionals struggle with processing the traumatic details of these offenses. This was the second highest identified stressor among professionals in their 20s, endorsed by nearly half (45%) of respondents in this age group. Overall, over a quarter of those who responded to the survey noted this as a top workplace stressor.

Conclusion: Younger professionals, with less exposure and experience, appear more susceptible to the emotional impact of vicarious trauma, which can affect their wellbeing, professional engagement, and client outcomes. As people gain experience, some may have developed strategies to manage the associated stress and/or become more de-sensitized. However, it is important to highlight that ongoing organizational support is crucial in supporting staff at all career stages.

Other Stressors

Several secondary stressors also emerged from the survey. The need for professional support networks seems to become more important as people age: only 5% of respondents in their 20s selected a lack of professional support as a stressor, compared to 35% in their 70s. This suggests that age and experience do

not eliminate the need for professional support, even if the form it takes may appear different from each professional.

Problematic interactions with colleagues, identified as a stressor for 23% percent of respondents overall, appear to become less stressful as people enter their 50s and 60s. This indicated that experience may foster resilience and more effective conflict management strategies.

Exposure to disturbing materials and concerns about job security were identified as significant stressors. This is not necessarily surprising given the nature of the work we do and the limited number of individuals with the ability and desire to do it.



Respondent Comments

Many of the respondents offered comments that provided insight into the challenges and struggles they experience in the workplace. A sampling of these is provided below, with light editing for clarity. These respondents described the frustration of working within a system that designs policy without considering research and working with a population misunderstood by lawmakers and society. Some comments reflected the stress created by long hours, large caseloads, and cumbersome documentation requirements. The challenges experienced in the workplace are exacerbated by a perceived lack of appreciation. Many felt undervalued by unsupportive management, outside agencies, and society:

- While the work itself can be a challenge, I have found that the biggest challenges actually lie within the workplace politics. At times, it feels that upper management can be so distanced from client work, and individuals who are doing more direct client care don't have as much of a voice in what happens as they could/should. The difficulties with clients can be expected on some level due to the level of trauma, antisociality, and personality disorders, but the difficulty with colleagues seems more daunting.
- My clients and colleagues are rarely the source of my stress. However, the source of my stress does include leadership that doesn't understand treatment (but thinks they do), lack of funding for continued education and career development, and systemic issues. These are what cause low job satisfaction at times.
- Not a lot stresses me. What INFURIATES me is the seemingly endless attempts by politicians to write and rewrite laws managing the lives of people who have a sexual offense in their history.
- Stressors for me include: Stigma regarding this profession and the clients we work with. Lack of adequate resources systemically and for clients in the community to support the changes and resources they need to actually address factors that reduce risk. Increasing punishments, sanctions, and restrictions beyond incarceration that undermine protective factors.
- Secondary trauma and processing the harm and deviant nature of individuals causes serious issues with trust and relationships, which are significant stressors.

- Unable to have impact/change with parole despite providing evidence-based information is frustrating.

Workplace Motivators

With so many frustrations in the world and in the workplace, it was important to look at what motivates professionals in this field. What gets professionals fired up and excited to do this work, day after day, year after year?

The survey provided respondents with a list of eight potential sources of joy and motivation in the workplace. Respondents were asked to identify the three that contribute most to their professional engagement and satisfaction. These motivators included:

- Observing client growth and progress
- Positive relationships with colleagues
- Participating in structured team-building activities/get-togethers
- Receiving recognition for professional contributions
- Experiencing supporting leadership
- Opportunities for professional development and growth
- Receiving competitive financial compensation
- Contributing to a safer society

The responses to this portion of the survey were themselves uplifting. Mental health professionals want to see people improve their lives and make a positive difference in the world.



Observing Client Growth and Change

For professionals working with individuals who have sexually harmed, client growth is more than just measurable progress—it's about witnessing meaningful changes in behaviors and self-awareness. This can look like a client taking accountability for their actions, developing empathy, and building healthy relationships. Noticeably, 81% of respondents said they are motivated by observing this growth and change in their clients; this was the most identified source of motivation overall and across every age group.

Conclusion: For almost everyone who responded to this survey, it remains incredibly satisfying to see clients make real, lasting strides toward healthier, more responsible lives as a result of their hard work, even with all the outside noise.

Contributing to a Safer Society

The second most identified source of motivation and joy was the respondents' sense of purpose from knowing their contributions are building safer communities. This motivation comes from the understanding that effective rehabilitation and prevention do more than reduce individual risk; they strengthen communities and help prevent future harm. Each intervention, assessment,

and moment of progress plays a part in promoting safety, accountability, and healing, both for clients and the broader community.

Overall, 61% of respondents viewed this contribution as a significant motivator, and this sense of purpose appeared to strengthen with experience, reaching 75% among those in their seventies.

Conclusion: According to the data, the belief in contributing to a safer society becomes more significant for professionals further along in their careers. This may reflect a growing recognition over time that abuse prevention efforts can have a broader impact on communities as well as on individual clients.

Other Motivators

There was less consistency across age groups in other factors that bring people joy and motivation at work. Overall, 44% of respondents identified positive relationships with their peers as a motivator. This remained consistent across most age groups but dropped off in importance among the oldest individuals surveyed (31% of respondents, 71-80 years old). Older professionals may not relate as well to their younger colleagues, may have developed other work priorities, or may rely more heavily on outside relationships. As managers or professionals working in private practice, this simply might not be relevant.

Nearly a third (29%) of individuals who completed the survey said opportunities for professional growth motivated them. This appears to be more important to the oldest and youngest professionals; 40% of those in their 20s and 56% of those in their 70s identified such opportunities as motivating, as compared to about a quarter of respondents in their 30s through their 60s. Several factors may contribute to this trend. Early-career professionals naturally recognize the need to build their skills and knowledge, while those with decades of experience may reflect on their work and identify areas where continued learning or renewal feels both necessary and meaningful.

Having supportive leadership was endorsed by 32% of respondents. However, its influence appeared to decline with age, as no respondents aged 60 or older reported that supportive leaders bring joy and motivation to their work. This pattern may reflect a shift that occurs as professionals take on leadership roles later in their careers, making this source of motivation less relevant.

While many respondents reported being influenced by their relationships with colleagues and supervisors, as well as opportunities for professional development, very few appear to value structured team-building activities. Organic and authentic opportunities for connecting appear to be more important than more forced interactions.

Respondent Comments

Respondents often described joy and fulfillment at seeing positive client change and making a difference. They recognized the challenges their clients face and how hard they must work to overcome them. Several individuals noted the sense of purpose that their work gives them. Many others referenced the support and understanding of like-minded colleagues.

- There is nothing more motivating to me than seeing an angry client in denial make very observable changes in both thoughts and attitudes, and then reporting how much they are learning and how much they look forward to sessions. This is especially fulfilling when they

return voluntarily with admissions that they need continued help with fantasies or attractions after completing mandated treatment.

- My life is meaningful, interesting, and purpose-driven.
- I enjoy seeing my clients grow and learn, even though it is difficult because we are censored in the materials we can use.
- I have an incredibly supportive boss who is also the director of the sex offense program. Her understanding of sex offense related issues and client needs, combined with her compassion and empathy for those who do the work, makes me want to work with her forever.
- I wouldn't be able to do this work without my amazing colleagues who are also friends. I cannot talk about my work to anyone else in my life, and one of them is always there when I need a consult or am feeling unsure of myself (it still happens after 15 years in the field).
- I love working with my clients. They work harder than any groups of humans I am ever around.

Discussion

Results from this survey identify many workplace factors that contribute—often unnecessarily—to stress and burnout. An inflexible system and unsupportive leadership can create a toxic environment in which professionals struggle to do their best work and produce meaningful results. The challenges of working with a difficult population in the absence of support result in a plethora of potential difficulties, especially for newcomers to the field.

It was not surprising that professionals in this field struggle with their inability to change systemic issues. It was more unexpected to see how many professionals experience stress due to problematic leadership and management. While everyone has, at times, complained about those overseeing their work, in this context, it was more than an occasional gripe. When professionals feel overworked and undervalued, it is unrealistic to expect them to model and teach healthy coping and self-regulation skills, especially during more frustrating clinical interactions. Many agencies promote treatment that is aligned with the [Good Lives Model](#) but they do so without creating an environment in which the needs of staff are recognized. It is clearly difficult for professionals to utilize a strengths-based approach to treatment when their own strengths are not acknowledged by their supervisors. This creates a risk of decreasing therapeutic effectiveness, along with the resulting impact this may have on community safety.



Professionals with many years of experience often develop skills that protect them from the impact of daily workplace stressors. It is easy to forget what it felt like to do that first interview or cofacilitate those first therapy groups. While today's professionals are more willing to acknowledge the impact of vicarious trauma on their wellbeing, we still

are not doing the best job in supporting one another through it. The youngest and oldest professionals in the field may be especially vulnerable.

What Can Be Done?

In light of these findings, the authors offer the following recommendations for the best way forward:

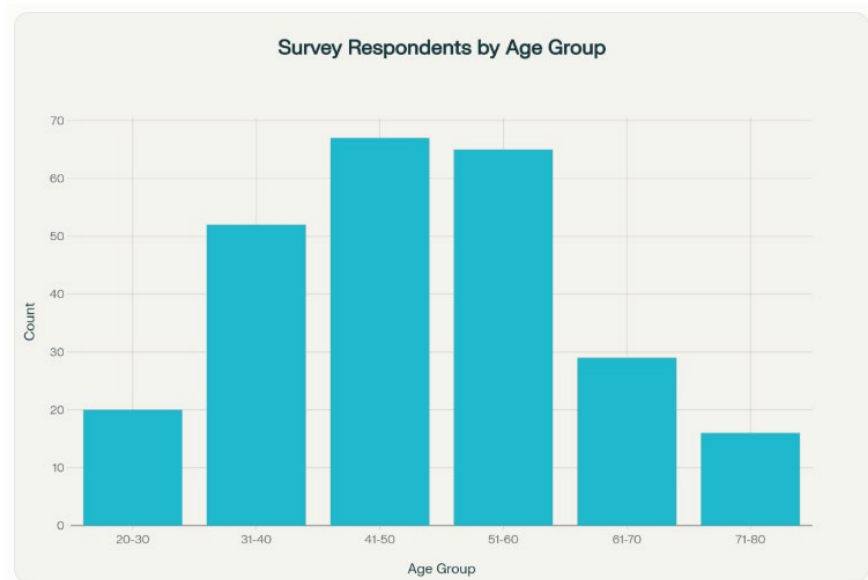
- Professionals in the field should be aware that they are not alone in facing these challenges. The concerns that so many respondents experience are more commonplace than we may believe.
- Administrators should recognize that their relationships with practitioners they oversee may not be as positive as they assume. Administrators should work to ensure that those they supervise feel heard, understood, and respected. Establishing a “culture of feedback,” where staff can share input without fear of retribution and with the hope of having an impact, can help achieve this ([Prescott et al., 2017](#)). From the perspective of these respondents, team-building exercises on their own are not sufficient.
- Professionals and administrators alike can become more aware of the available literature on moral injury and institutional betrayal.
- Agencies and organizations in this field need to find ways to support their clinical staff more effectively, especially newer professionals, so that they can remain sensitive to the impact of abuse without taking on the trauma of others as their own.

The good news in these findings, as well as in earlier surveys, is that professionals are well-aware of the challenges they face, already possess many of the skills they need for selfcare, and are well acquainted with the joy to be found in this work.

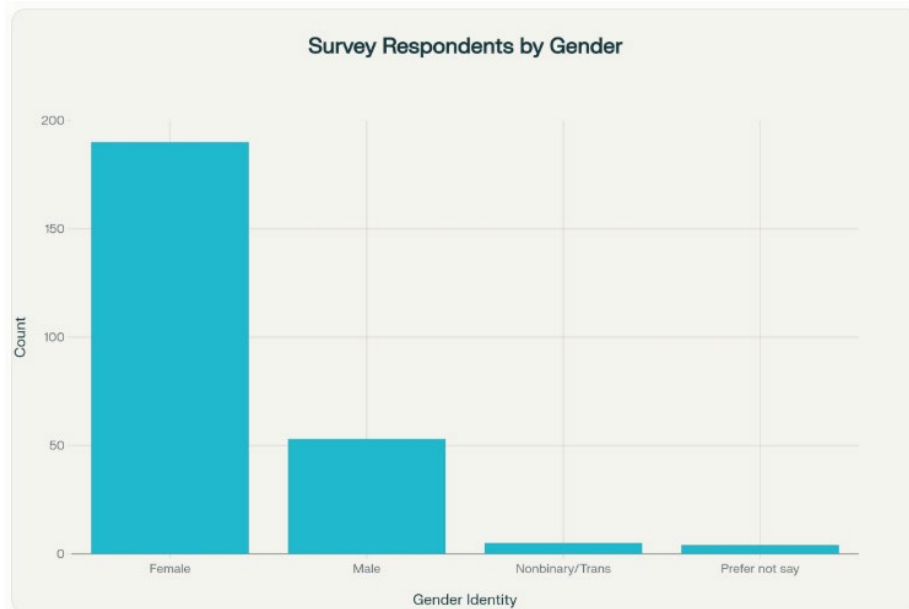
Conclusion

This survey sheds light on both the difficulties and positive experiences of professionals working with individuals who have sexually abused. The data demonstrate that while these professionals contend with significant systemic and organizational barriers, they also derive motivation from supporting their clients’ progress and contributing to community safety. To foster a more resilient and effective workplace, organizations must address these challenges, improve leadership practices, and create supportive environments. Acknowledging the unique stresses of working in this field will help ensure that professionals remain engaged, effective, and empowered in their roles.

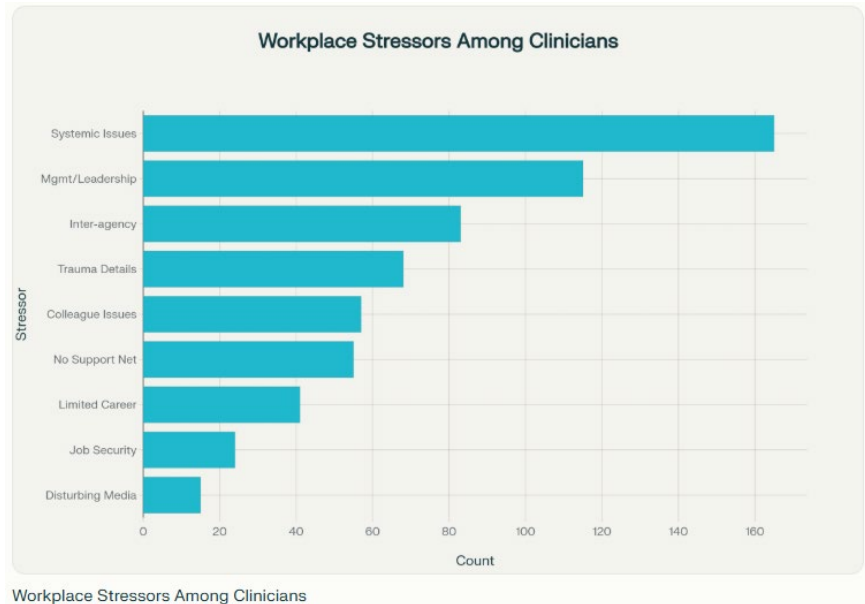
Tables and Graphs from the 2025 Workplace Stressors and Motivators Survey



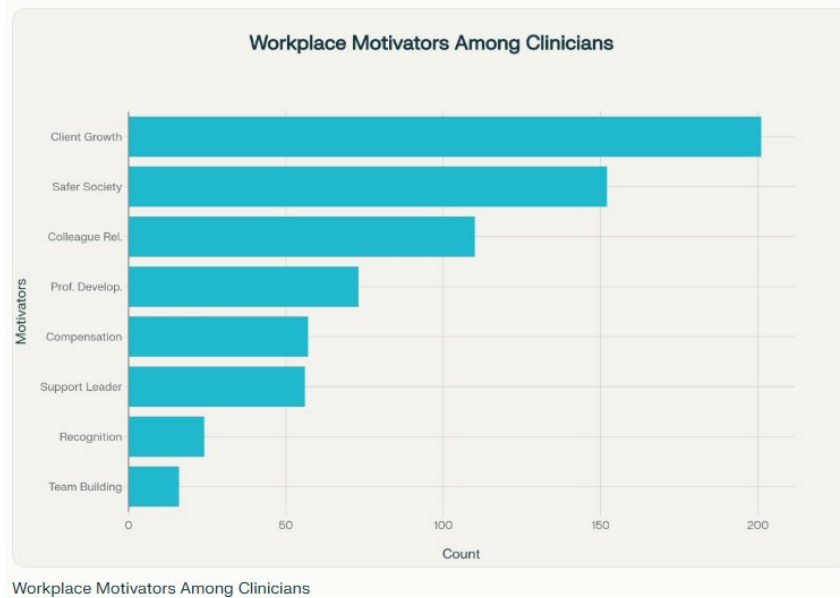
Age distribution of survey respondents



Gender distribution of survey respondents



Workplace Stressors by Age Group										
Age Group	Inability to change systemic issues	Workplace management or leadership challenges	Inter-agency collaboration difficulties	Processing traumatic details of offenses	Challenging interaction s with colleagues	Lack of professional support networks	Limited career development opportunities	Job security concerns	Exposure to disturbing visual materials	Total
20-30	16	8	9	9	4	1	3	1	2	53
31-40	35	27	23	12	12	9	12	5	3	138
41-50	43	32	22	19	17	18	11	7	4	173
51-60	41	28	18	16	20	13	10	8	4	158
61-70	19	12	7	6	3	8	3	2	1	61
71-80	11	8	4	6	1	6	2	1	1	40
Total	165	115	83	68	57	55	41	24	15	623



Age Group	Observing client growth and progress	Positive relationships with colleagues	Participating in structured team-building activities/get-togethers	Receiving recognition for professional contributions	Experiencing supportive leadership	Opportunities for professional development and growth	Receiving competitive financial compensation	Contributing to a safer society	Total
20-30	16	9	3	1	5	8	4	12	58
31-40	40	23	3	9	12	13	11	32	143
41-50	52	32	2	5	13	18	18	37	177
51-60	54	27	4	3	16	17	18	42	181
61-70	24	14	2	3	7	8	5	17	80
71-80	15	5	2	3	3	9	1	12	50
Total	201	110	16	24	56	73	57	152	689