

## Work Exposure to Child Pornography in ICAC Task Forces and Affiliates

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### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force commanders and liaisons to ICAC affiliates responded to an online survey. Participants represented local, county, state, and federal law enforcement from across the United States.

- ◆ Sworn personnel in 511 agencies had been exposed to child pornography during investigations of crimes involving child sexual exploitation.
- ◆ Prosecutors and other civilian employees were also exposed to child pornography in many agencies.
- ◆ About half of the survey participants were concerned about the psychological impacts of work exposure to child pornography.
  - Concern was highest among ICAC Task Forces and those who had attended presentations about possible problems related to child pornography exposure.
- ◆ 35% of ICAC Task Force participants and 10% of those from affiliates had seen problems arising from work exposure to child pornography.
- ◆ Close to 40% of participants thought more mental health services were needed in their agencies.
- ◆ Few agencies gave information about possible related stresses to personnel who viewed child pornography.
- ◆ Some participants said their work was not supported and respected within their agencies.
- ◆ Lack of forensic capacity, obsolete equipment, and training were concerns for some agencies.
- ◆ Many participants supported mandatory introductory programs for personnel starting child pornography investigations, but few supported other mandates.
- ◆ Most participants found their work satisfying, but with some reservations.

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### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Recommended responses include:

- ◆ Creating training programs and written materials about work exposure to child pornography
- ◆ Openly discussing adverse sexual reactions
- ◆ Recognizing needs of small agencies and units, prosecutors and civilian employees
- ◆ Encouraging communication between personnel and supervisors
- ◆ Conducting research so that evidence-based policies to protect the well-being of personnel can be created

### WORK EXPOSURE TO CHILD PORNOGRAPHY

*"I have only been doing this for a couple months. What I saw made me sick to my stomach and affected me outside of work." \**

*"Exposure to child pornography does cause some stress, but the main stress is caused by the large number of cases to investigate and a small number of investigators to do the work."*

*"I feel a sworn officer learns to deal with all sorts of negativity in their work, thereby allowing them to disconnect. I see the importance of what I do and it doesn't affect me because I don't allow it to."*

*"It's not only child porn. It's the talking to sex offenders almost every week and then trying to lead a normal and healthy sexual experience in marriage."*

Increasing numbers of law enforcement personnel are being exposed to graphic images of child sexual abuse as they investigate cases involving child pornography on the Internet. These include sworn personnel, prosecutors, civilian forensic analysts, and other civilians.

\* All quotes are the words of participants, with minor corrections of grammar and spelling.

This type of work exposure to disturbing images of children being sexually victimized is a new phenomenon. Questions have been raised about whether it is causing stress to law enforcement personnel and what agency policies and practices will best safeguard those conducting these important investigations.

Because of such questions, the ICAC Task Force Training & Technical Assistance Program sponsored an online survey of ICAC Task Forces and affiliates. This report describes the experiences and opinions of 511 ICAC commanders and affiliate contact persons who responded to the survey.

The goals of the survey were to:

- ◆ Find out the extent of exposure to child pornography among sworn and civilian personnel
- ◆ Describe problems that participants had seen
- ◆ Understand how personnel were chosen and prepared to investigate child pornography cases
- ◆ Identify supports available to personnel
- ◆ Find out how agencies were handling this issue

This report focuses on the experiences and opinions of sworn personnel. The survey included questions about prosecutors, civilian forensic analysts and other civilians. However, most of the participants were sworn personnel who were not sure how to answer questions about civilian employees. Because of this, we could not include much information about civilian employees in this report, although many of the conclusions and recommendations apply to all employees who view child pornography in the course of their work in the criminal justice system.

### WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY?

The ICAC Task Force program was created to help state and local law enforcement agencies enhance investigative responses to offenders who use the Internet and related technologies to sexually exploit children. The program includes regional ICAC Task Forces in every state and affiliates, which are partner agencies that have agreed in writing to adhere to ICAC Operational and Investigative Standards. The ICAC program is funded by the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

This survey was conducted by the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. It was distributed by e-mail in Spring 2008 to all of the ICAC Task Forces and ICAC affiliates, a total of 1,797 law enforcement agencies. We received responses from 40 ICAC Task Forces and 524 affiliates. Over 90% of these agencies (511) had sworn personnel who were exposed to child pornography during investigations. This report contains information from these agencies — 40 ICAC Task Force host agencies and 471 affiliates.

Responding agencies included local, county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies.

- ◆ 22% served small jurisdictions (populations of 25,000 or less).
- ◆ 32% served medium-sized jurisdictions (populations between 25,001 and 100,000).
- ◆ The rest, 45%, served jurisdictions of over 100,000. About half of these larger agencies served more than 500,000 people.
- ◆ Most agencies—63%—conducted at least some computer forensic examinations.
- ◆ Most of the ICAC Task Forces were established prior to 2005 and had extensive experience investigating child pornography cases.
- ◆ The ICAC Task Force program began forming formal affiliations with other law enforcement agencies in 2005. Some affiliates had a lot of experience investigating child pornography cases while others had no or very little experience.

The individuals who responded to the survey were ICAC Task Force commanders and ICAC contact persons for affiliates. 83% were men and 17% were women. Participants had a wide range of experience with the ICAC program and with child pornography investigations in general.

- ◆ While only 10% had worked in an ICAC program for 5 or more years, many more — 41% — had been working child pornography cases for 5 or more years.
- ◆ 39% had worked child pornography cases for between 2 and 4 years, while 19% had worked on such cases for 1 year or less.
- ◆ 37% had attended presentations or trainings that discussed psychological reactions to child pornography.

### In many agencies, exposure to child pornography was not limited to sworn personnel

- ◆ Prosecutors viewed child pornography in 52% of agencies.
- ◆ Civilian forensic analysts were exposed in 15% of agencies.
- ◆ Other civilians were exposed in 9% of agencies.

Altogether, in 61% of agencies where sworn personnel were exposed to child pornography, civilian employees also viewed it.

### In many agencies the number of employees exposed to child pornography was small

- ◆ In 43% of agencies, only 1 to 3 sworn personnel viewed child pornography.
- ◆ In agencies where civilians were exposed to child pornography, it was usually only a small number of civilians who were exposed.

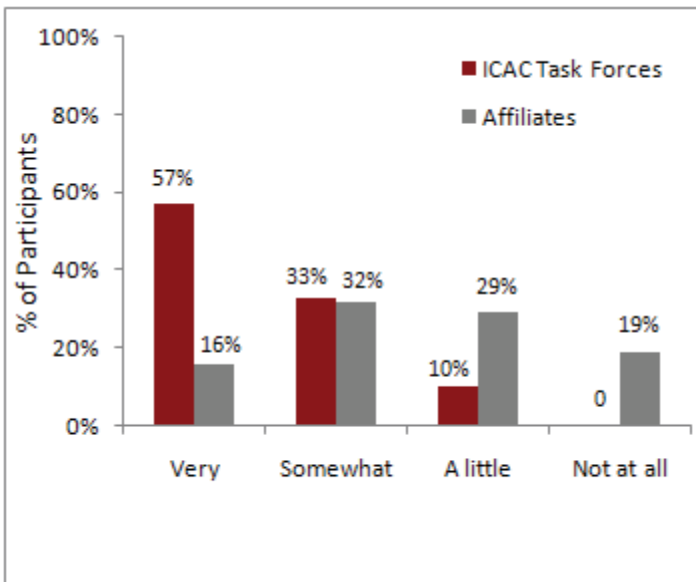
The amount of time sworn employees spent on child pornography cases varied.

Some individuals worked full time on child sexual exploitation crimes but others worked only 1 or 2 cases a year.

**HOW CONCERNED WERE PARTICIPANTS ABOUT WORK EXPOSURE TO CHILD PORNOGRAPHY?**

18% of participants were not at all concerned about work exposure to child pornography, but none of the ICAC Task Forces were in this group. 90% of ICAC Task Forces were somewhat or very concerned, as were 48% of affiliates (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. How concerned were participants about the psychological impacts of CP exposure?



**HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS HAD SEEN PROBLEMS?**

Only 10% of survey participants had seen problems in their agencies among investigators who viewed child pornography. However, 35% of ICAC Task Force members answered yes to this question compared to only 8% of affiliates.

We asked participants who had seen problems to describe the most serious problem they had personally seen.

Personal, family, and marital problems

A number of participants mentioned insomnia, stress, depression, and weight gain that seemed related to exposure to child pornography.

Some had seen effects on family relationships, including relationships with children. They said:

*“Hyper-vigilance around children – always suspicious of adult males in particular”*

*“A wife called after her husband viewed child pornography related to a case, and said. ‘He came home ... very upset and wouldn’t hug either of his two daughters and was very distant.’”*

*“Employee was crying uncontrollably after viewing multiple images of cp the day he found out his wife was pregnant with their first child.”*

Some mentioned that seeing explicit, disturbing sexual images affected sexual and marital relationships. They experienced...

*“Sexual side effects – avoidance, intrusive images”*

*“Intrusive thoughts during intimate times with my wife all but discontinued that part of our relationship for a long period of time. Going to a therapist on my own helped put it in context.”*

*“Marital stress, personal distancing, overall increased agitation and distress”*

Work-related problems

People also described problems at work, such as anger, loss of objectivity and drops in productivity.

*“In general, everyone seems to be shocked and disgusted at what they have to view. This usually turns into anger at the suspect.”*

*“The officer took an initial report of possible child pornography possession and was disgusted and disturbed by the few images he saw. The officer indicated he never wanted to take a report on this type of material again.”*

*“One [employee] was transferred out of the unit after investigating a production case. Her work progress stalled, she became personally lethargic, did not want to come to work, could not write reports.”*

Two participants mentioned inappropriate behavior by investigators, *“one-upmanship in shock value competitions”* and *“profuse profanity at work.”* Another described an employee who seemed to have trouble gauging what reactions were appropriate.

*“Employee being hypersensitive to reporting every small exposure to nudity in their life and worrying about whether they had looked at some images... for an inappropriate period of time even though the looking was work-related.”*

One participant was concerned about an employee who had *“what was perceived as an overly intense attraction to the images.”*

Some participants described problems with how child pornography cases were handled. They described problems like...

*“Child porn/molestation cases usually require an enormous amount of paperwork.”*

*“[I was] going numb from viewing hundreds of pictures and videos in a single session. Learned to spread it out over a period of time”*

*“Improper handling of evidence related to children’s images. Untimely delays in getting the investigation started...”*

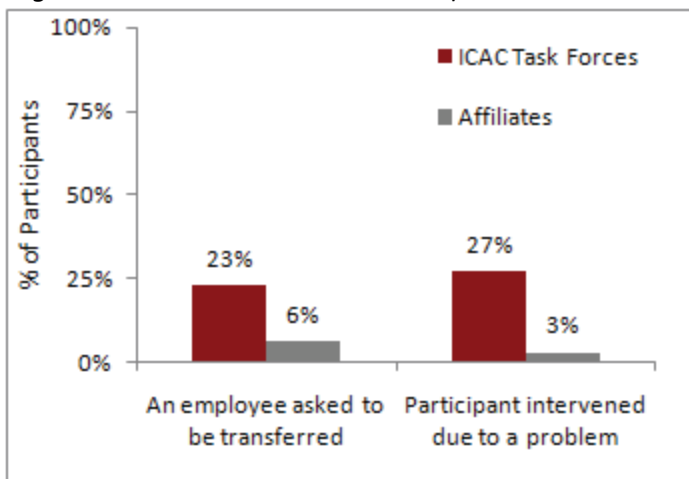
*“Inability of prosecutors in [this] county to take cases to trial”*

*“Not having enough time in the day to properly do the job.”*

Intervening with personnel because of problems and requests for transfers

- ◆ 5% of participants had intervened with personnel because of problems with work exposure to child pornography, but this included 23% of ICAC Task Forces and only 3% of affiliates (See Figure 2).
- ◆ 8% of participants said someone in their unit had asked to be transferred. This included 23% of ICAC Task Forces and 6% of affiliates.

Figure 2. Had intervened due to CP exposure



We asked participants who had intervened with personnel to describe what happened.

*“The employee was having problems at work and personally. EAP was offered and rejected. Temp assignments were offered and rejected. Progress plans were created. Peer support was generated. Ultimately, I asked for a transfer [for the employee].”*

*“I required the person to seek out employee assistance. The employee ultimately took another job that didn’t involve child porn.”*

Other interventions were also used,

*“Ensured that this employee did not have 100% of their duties assigned as viewing child pornography”*

*“Provided peer counseling”*

*“Offered to have the case transferred to another agency for examination (Offer was turned down.)”*

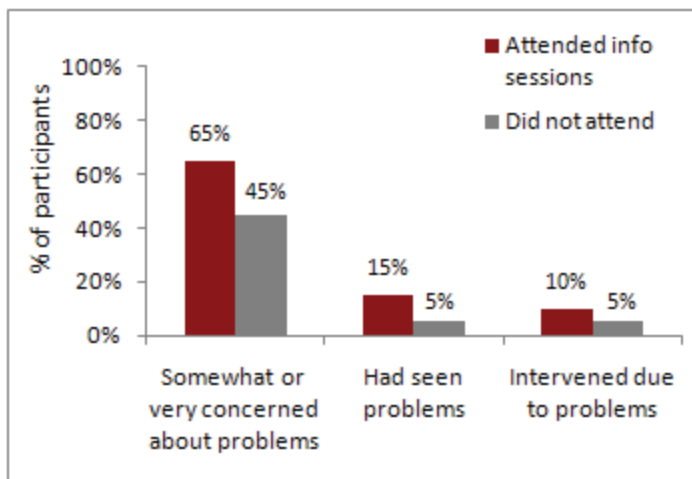
*“Seeing the employee being short with others and appearing to be angry and disruptive; talked with employee and gave them time off to pursue hobbies such as fishing for a couple of days.”*

However, 82% of participants had not seen any problems related to exposure to child pornography. This included 57% of Task Forces and over 84% of affiliates.

These results could mean that few personnel have problems – but they could also mean that problems are going unrecognized. There is some evidence for the latter (See Figure 3) because participants who had attended presentations about problems related to work exposure to child pornography were more likely to say they...

- ◆ Were somewhat or very concerned about such problems
- ◆ Had seen such problems
- ◆ Had intervened because of a problem

Figure 3. Awareness of problems related to CP exposure according to information session attendance



**HOW WERE PERSONNEL CHOSEN TO WORK CASES THAT INVOLVED EXPOSURE TO CHILD PORNOGRAPHY ?**

Assignment to ICAC programs

We asked survey participants how much the following statement applied to their agency: *“People have been assigned to the program when they didn’t want to be.”*

- ◆ Most agencies—92%—said the statement applied not at all or somewhat.
- ◆ 2% of all participants and 8% of Task Force members said this statement applied very much.

Overall, 19% of agencies assigned unwilling personnel to child pornography cases at least occasionally. However, it was unclear how often personnel were given real opportunities to turn down assignments as opposed to simply making no objections. In small- and medium-sized agencies, personnel that work in, for example, juvenile family services divisions, may find that viewing child pornography “comes with the territory.” In larger departments with high tech crime units, personnel who want careers in cyber crime may have to join an ICAC unit to gain experience, or they may work in a cyber crime unit that requires them to handle child pornography cases periodically.

Some participants provided more detail about how they were assigned to investigate child pornography cases. Many noted their own interest, but some described situations where employees had no choice about taking child pornography cases.

*“Sheriff discussed the program with me and asked if I would be interested and able to do it.”*

*“Small agencies don’t see that many cases per year. Officers get assigned to handle the call, and then it’s usually turned over to the detective...whichever officer is on duty is expected to handle or start the investigation.”*

*“You just get assigned.”*

#### Flexible assignments

We asked participants to rate the helpfulness of “having flexibility at work (transfer easily, pursue other interests, etc.)” in terms of “helping people stay healthy and productive in work that involves exposure to child pornography.” 74% said such flexibility was very or extremely helpful.

60% of participants said their agencies had flexible assignments. One participant stated,

*“As a supervisor over my unit, I try to ensure that each person has a break between each child pornography case. We have ... other cases such as credit card fraud... that also need ... forensic examination.”*

But in 34% of agencies, this was not the case. One person noted,

*“I have requested to work other cases due to burn-out on CAC cases, but was informed no one else has the experience to work these cases in our small office.”*

Some personnel, even in small offices, have more control over their work load however. One noted,

*“I do not have to work these cases if I do not want to. If I choose, I can stop taking a proactive approach ... and take a break from these cases.”*

Another strategy that offers flexibility is “exit tickets” that allow personnel to transfer at any time, no questions asked. 29% of all agencies used exit tickets, with the proportion being higher among ICAC Task Forces—43%—than among affiliates—29%.

#### Preparation for potential psychological reactions

Only 21% of agencies gave sworn personnel any preparation before they were first exposed to child pornography. Among ICAC Task Forces, the number was higher—45%—while only 19% of affiliates provided some preparation.

Most preparation took the form of interviews and one-on-one discussions. For example, one ICAC Task Force member stated,

*“During the selection process, the unit supervisor discusses in detail the kinds of material ICAC detectives have to deal with. Prospective detectives are given the opportunity to ask questions, raise objections, etc.”*

Members of ICAC affiliates said,

*“The potential assignee is interviewed and made aware of what kind of material he or she will be exposed to. If there are any reservations then the person is not selected.”*

*“Prior to the selection process the examiners are told about some of the past cases investigated involving ... child porn.”*

Some agencies have more elaborate preparation. One ICAC Task Force member stated,

*“Agents are briefed on potential impacts, assist on cases to determine initial reactions, attend training, take compassion fatigue self exams.”*

Participants from agencies that provided initial preparation also mentioned:

- ◆ Exposure to child pornography content in controlled environments
- ◆ On-the-job training with peers
- ◆ Training courses that discussed child pornography exposure, ICAC courses in particular
- ◆ Meetings with forensic investigators
- ◆ Tours of computer forensics facilities
- ◆ Psychological evaluations
- ◆ Specific discussions with employees who were parents about possible reactions
- ◆ Discussions about the availability of psychological services and contact information for such services

### Screening for histories of child sexual abuse or close contact with young children

Few agencies screened personnel who worked child pornography cases beyond the normal evaluation and screening processes used for new officers.

- ◆ Only 8% of agencies asked personnel about having histories of, or personal experiences with, child sexual abuse; 20% of ICAC Task Forces asked this question compared to 7% of affiliates.
- ◆ 13% asked personnel whether they were currently parenting or in close contact with children, including 35% of ICAC Task Forces and 11% of affiliates.

### **WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORTS WERE PROVIDED TO PERSONNEL WHO WORKED CHILD PORNOGRAPHY CASES?**

Most agencies provided mental health resources to sworn personnel.

- ◆ 82% had Employee Assistance Programs (EAP).
- ◆ 67% had chaplains.
- ◆ 51% provided other internal psychological services.
- ◆ 36% had peer counseling programs.
- ◆ 53% had access to external mental healthcare providers.

Only 4% of agencies provided no psychological resources. 61% provided at least 3 of the 5 resources listed above.

Another concern is whether psychologists are knowledgeable or comfortable talking about exposure to child pornography.

- ◆ Participants in only 13% of agencies with Employee Assistance Programs said EAP staff were knowledgeable about work exposure to child pornography.
- ◆ Only 19% had EAP staff that were comfortable talking about child pornography.

One participant did not find a welcoming atmosphere from the agency EAP staff:

*"I have gone to our agency sponsored EAP on my own, not with any problem, just to try to start a rapport with them and maybe set up a schedule for them to evaluate us. They basically told me that if I didn't have any real problem they couldn't help."*

But others had confidence in their departments' resources:

*"[Our department] employs two Ph.D-level psychologists. They have considerable experience dealing with stress, burnout, etc. Their experiences and skills are not tied specifically to child pornography matters, but they would be able to address such issues."*

### Need for more psychological resources

39% of participants said their agencies needed more psychological resources for personnel exposed to child pornography.

### Attitudes about seeking help for psychological difficulties

We asked whether the attitudes in agencies supported help-seeking by personnel with difficulties related to child pornography exposure.

- ◆ 49% of all participants said it was very or mostly acceptable to seek help for problems. 78% of Task Force members said this, compared to about 47% of affiliate members.

But some participants noted significant resistance to acknowledging problems.

- ◆ 6% said help-seeking was not at all acceptable in their agencies, and 31% said it was only somewhat acceptable. One participant said,

*"In a small agency you keep your comments and problems to yourself otherwise you are ridiculed about not being able to do your job."*

### Periodic meetings with psychologists or psychological assessments

13% of ICAC Task Forces and 5% of affiliates had mandatory mental health requirements for sworn personnel who viewed child pornography, mostly annual or semi-annual visits to psychologists.

Also, some participants noted that supervisors could order personnel to seek counseling if they appeared to be under stress, whether job-related or not.

### Information about signs of stress

Few agencies had, in the past year, held any staff meetings or training sessions that included discussions of:

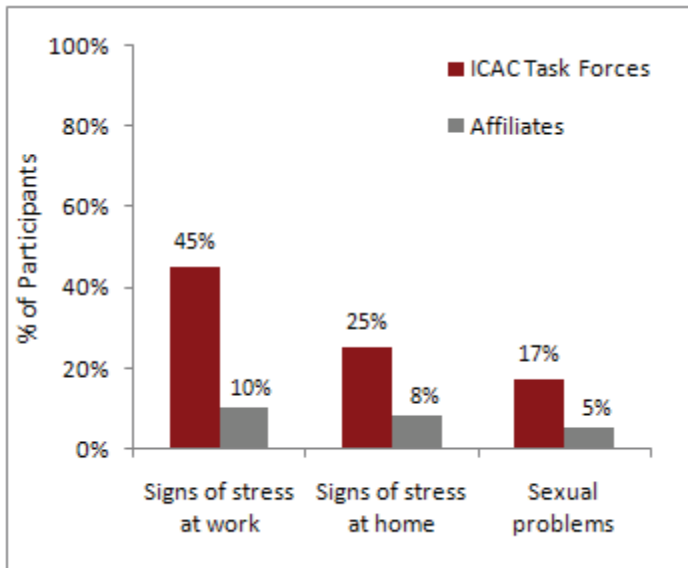
- ◆ Signs of stress at work related to exposure to child pornography, such as anger and depression – 12% of agencies
- ◆ Signs of stress at home, such as withdrawal, sleep problems, hyper-vigilance around children – 10% of agencies
- ◆ Sexual problems, such as lack of interest, intrusive images – 6% of agencies

ICAC Task Forces were more likely to address these issues than were affiliates (See Figure 4).

### Discussing feelings about child pornography

83% of participants said they rarely or never heard personnel discussing feelings about viewing child pornography.

Figure 4. Had discussions of stress or sexual problems



However, 37% of participants said they had brought this topic up with personnel in the past year, including 90% of ICAC Task Force members and 32% of affiliates.

Some agencies created opportunities for discussions.

- ◆ 25% held staff meetings where reactions to child pornography were discussed.
- ◆ 25% had individual case reviews where such matters were discussed.
- ◆ 5% had group sessions led by a psychologist.

Some agencies relied on more informal processes. One participant noted, *“small agency, close working relationships.”*

And some participants emphasized the importance of discussions with peers. One participant said,

*“Having other investigators you can talk to about the cases you work and being able to express the effects it has on you without judgment because they too face the same and understand better than those outside of law enforcement.”*

In addition, the sensitivity of supervisors to this issue may be a factor in opportunities for discussion. One survey participant noted, *“I check on my people constantly to ensure that they are okay and not in need of relief or counseling.”*

Informal gatherings of personnel such as lunches, sporting events, and after work get-togethers forge bonds that encourage discussion. However, only 30% of participants said their agencies had informal gatherings.

Physical exercise is another way of relieving stress. 63% of survey participants said their agencies had onsite exercise facilities.

#### Information to spouses and significant others

Only 3% of agencies gave information to spouses or significant others about the nature of child pornography or possible problems related to viewing it. Some members of agencies that did said,

*“[Our] office has an open door policy to families related to ICAC officers. They are informed of the terrible nature of child pornography and the impact that it can have on some people.”*

*“Information regarding behavioral changes that may appear as investigator deals with his or her anger regarding the abuse of children, and a clear picture of the type of investigations their spouses are working. We encourage them to talk about their feelings...”*

*“Annual briefings are given to spouses concerning the nature of investigative operations and possible warning signs.”*

#### Agency support and respect

- ◆ 46% of participants felt their agencies gave a lot of respect to personnel who investigated child sex crimes.
- ◆ When asked about the backing of prosecutors and judges, 41% said “conflicts or frustrations with the way prosecutors handle cases” were “no problem at all,” and 28% said conflicts or frustrations with judges were “no problem at all.”
- ◆ These numbers were similar for Task Forces and affiliates.

On the other hand, many agencies did not feel fully supported, and some had significant problems.

- ◆ 11% said that no or very little respect was given to child sex crime investigators.
- ◆ 23% said the culture of their agency was a problem.

Participants noted,

*“Most of the employees believe that it is not a problem in our area and don’t understand that child pornography is mentally draining and can affect you on the job and at home.”*

*“Comments have been made by other co-workers that do not work these cases [that] all ‘we’ do is work in the office and don’t get out and do anything.”*

In addition, 29% said conflicts or frustrations with prosecutors were problems and 32% said there were problems with judges.

#### Forensic capacity and training

- ◆ 40% of participants said lack of forensic capacity was a problem.
- ◆ 35% of agencies said obsolete equipment and lack of training were problems.

ICAC Task Forces were more likely than affiliates to say they lacked forensic capacity, possibly because of the high volume of cases many Task Forces handle. On the other hand, Task Forces were less likely to report difficulties with obsolete equipment; only 15% said this was a problem.

In some cases, agencies were conducting child pornography investigations with little financial support or other backing. Comments included,

*"My work in this area is totally voluntary. If I did not seek out training, I would have none."*

*"Unfortunately, the [county] does not see child sexual exploitation as a serious problem so they do not fund any formal units. Ours is a self-made unit."*

*"There are far more cases happening than we have capacity to investigate, prosecute and either incarcerate or manage in the community."*

Overall, 42% of agencies had good resources in that they rated all of the questions about forensic capacity, equipment, and training as "no problem at all" or only "somewhat" of a problem.

## VIEWES ABOUT HOW TO MINIMIZE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF EXPOSURE TO CHILD PORNOGRAPHY

### Support for mandatory requirements

The majority of participants did not support mandatory requirements for personnel exposed to child pornography, such as mandatory screening, psychological assessments or rotations. But there was one exception.

- ◆ 75% of participants supported mandatory introductory programs that described the nature of child pornography and possible reactions to it.

While most did not want mandatory screening or psychological assessments, 43% of participants supported these suggestions. Supporters said,

*"I do believe that psychological 'check-ups' of personnel involved in child exploitation cases should be mandatory everywhere, no matter the size or volume of the agency."*

*"Optional may lead to less participation and fear of being labeled for seeking help."*

Those against such requirements said,

*"I think mandatory screening and assessments would be intrusive and would provide no assistance of value for an individual."*

*"I don't think individuals would be honest during assessments..."*

*"The only concern I have regarding psychological testing is the potential stigma that may follow an employee if the information gets out that the employee is not doing well and needs to be transferred from the unit."*

Almost all participants, 90%, disagreed with the idea of mandatory rotations. Several noted the degree of training that is required and the difficulties faced by smaller agencies. For example,

*"With the training expense of computer forensics, it is not practical for a small agency to rotate examiners. Most agencies this size don't even have one. If I don't do it no one else will."*

*"Due to agency size, it is very difficult to rotate people out and find suitable personnel who are willing to work these types of cases. Most officers and investigators in our department do not want to work child abuse/sexual abuse/child pornography cases."*

Participants also noted that mandatory screenings, assessments, or rotations were not practical in many circumstances or would violate agency working agreements. For example,

*"I think making these things mandatory would not work and we would lose affiliates."*

*"Many of these mandates would not be attainable by small agencies."*

*"Union contracts play a large part in what an agency can or cannot do with employees in this area."*

Other participants simply didn't like the idea of mandates. As one said, *"I don't care for mandatory anything."*

We also asked participants to rate the helpfulness of other resources for dealing with problems that might arise as a result of work-related exposure to child pornography.

The list below shows how many thought the following options would be "very or extremely helpful."

- ◆ Making sure small agencies have access to programs and services, 72%
- ◆ Making sure prosecutors are not left out of programs and services, 69%
- ◆ Introductory programs that alert personnel to the nature of child pornography and the possible effects of exposure, 66%
- ◆ Training psychologists in Employee Assistance Programs about child pornography, 58%
- ◆ Screening requirements before transfer into an ICAC program, 47%
- ◆ Including discussion about the possible effects of exposure to child pornography in technical training programs, 55%
- ◆ Making sure civilians are not left out of services and program, 48%
- ◆ Regular, optional psychological assessments, 45%
- ◆ Training peer counselors, 39%
- ◆ Optional rotations, 39%
- ◆ Developing a self-help website, 31%



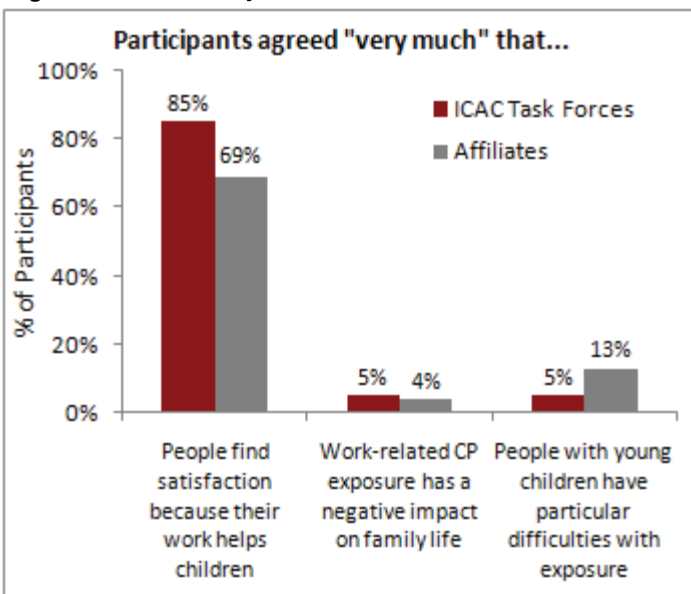
Work satisfaction

71% of participants agreed that, “People find great satisfaction in their work because investigating child pornography helps children.” They said this statement “applies very much.”

Only 4% participants believed that viewing child pornography had strong adverse effects on the family lives of personnel; another 27% felt there was some negative impact. 55% felt there was no negative impact. (The rest were not sure.)

44% believed that parents of young children had particular difficulties, while 42% said this was not the case. (The rest were not sure.)

Figure 5. Work satisfaction



Qualities that help personnel stay healthy and productive

When we asked about what qualities help people stay healthy and productive in work that involves exposure to child pornography, most participants agreed with the following:

- ◆ Having successful outcomes in investigations, 91%
- ◆ Having a strong family, 83%
- ◆ Having friends and interests outside law enforcement, 83%
- ◆ Having flexibility at work, 74%
- ◆ Getting a lot of exercise, 63%
- ◆ Longevity in law enforcement, 60%

When asked to name other helpful qualities, a number of participants noted the importance of supervisors who are sensitive to reactions of employees. They said, for example, “good communication with first line supervisor,” “supervisors that understand ICAC cases,” and “good supervision, someone who’s looking out for the employee.” Others noted the importance of camaraderie and understanding peers.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Exposure to child pornography may be a source of stress distinct from other police work because of the vivid depictions of harm done to children and sexual content of the images. The responses from participants in this study make it clear that some personnel have suffered considerable distress as a result of exposure to this material.

Many survey participants were concerned about possible negative effects of exposure to child pornography. Some described witnessing or experiencing personal and family problems, sexual difficulties, and work-related issues such as lowered productivity and requests for transfers.

Concerns about work exposure to child pornography were not universal. However, relatively few participants had actually seen or recognized problems in their agencies. Also, some who had seen problems did not view them as uniquely associated with exposure to child pornography, but rather as part of the expected stresses of police work. Most participants found their work satisfying, but many felt there were some negative impacts on family life and some difficulties for those with young children. We drew two main conclusions from the findings of this survey.

First, it is important to be aware of and acknowledge that exposure to child pornography can cause problems for some personnel. If there is little awareness of the potential for problems, problems may not be recognized and addressed when they arise. Some participants in this survey even noted that they had never thought of these issues before. One said, “You’ve opened my eyes to a ton of things I have not been giving a second thought to.” Awareness among supervisors may be particularly important.

Second, awareness is enhanced by education and training. About 35% of survey participants had attended presentations or educational sessions that addressed potential problems related to viewing child pornography; they were more likely to be concerned about the well-being of personnel and to have noted problems among some employees.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Education and training about possible negative reactions to viewing child pornography should be provided to all involved personnel. All supervisory personnel in ICAC Task Force programs, including those who work in affiliate agencies should receive such training. Prosecutors, civilian forensic analysts, and other civilians involved in these investigations should also be included in education and training. Survey participants suggested including this topic in technical training classes and creating materials that would be available to spouses and others.

Survey participants noted that undercover investigations in which personnel pose as minors also create difficulties for some personnel because of their sexually explicit content. For

example, *“Those that engage in undercover chat operations or those that work cases involving communication between adults and children are exposed to material that I believe can be just as harmful ...”* Problems related to such investigations should be addressed with education and training.

2. *The possibility of adverse sexual reactions should be openly discussed.* Only 5% of participants said their programs had, in the past year, held staff meetings or training sessions that included discussions of possible sexual problems related to viewing child pornography. Yet it appears from survey comments that some participants were plagued with reactions such as intrusive images and thoughts that impaired their ability to engage in healthy sexual relationships – and, for some individuals, counseling helped them to overcome such problems.

Personnel experiencing sexual distress should be provided with resources and encouraged to seek help. Developing written materials on this topic would also be helpful because some people may be reluctant to seek help for sexual problems. Materials should be prepared with the input of experienced counselors and created to be shared with family members and romantic partners, in case personnel need help in explaining issues and gaining understanding from their partners.

3. *Employees should be clearly informed about the nature of child sexual exploitation investigations and given the opportunity to turn down assignments.* While many agencies allowed personnel to choose whether to work child pornography cases, not all did. For many employees, who are confronted with all types of crimes and expect to handle whatever they are faced with, this may not be a problem. But such work may be particularly difficult for some personnel – for example, some with histories of child sexual abuse and some who are parents. Making sure that personnel are clearly informed about the nature of the work and allowed to opt in or out will help to avoid placing personnel who may be particularly prone to negative reactions in positions where they may not be able to function well or remain.

There was strong support for introductory programs for personnel beginning assignments that require exposure to child pornography, but few agencies had such programs in place. These would be an ideal place to alert personnel to possible problems and explain available supports.

4. *Address isolation among personnel by recognizing the needs of small agencies and units, prosecutors, and civilian employees.* Personnel who are working in relative isolation can be supported by training supervisors to understand the types of problems some personnel experience. Encouraging regular phone calls and check-ins by ICAC Task Forces to staff in small affiliates and prosecutors’ offices, holding regular meetings or trainings that include all impacted employees, and assisting smaller agencies when investigations

arise in their jurisdictions would help to alleviate feelings of isolation in these agencies.

5. *Acknowledge the frustrations of trying to conduct investigations with insufficient resources.* Lack of technical and training resources were problems for many agencies. Several participants remarked that the efforts of their agencies were hindered by administrators that did not view child sexual exploitation investigations as priorities or understand the resources required. Another noted, *“The task force is growing and affiliates are being added, but infrastructure is not keeping pace.”*

While there is often no easy solution to a lack of funds, there may be ways to ease the problem. Examples include educating commanders in larger agencies, reaching out to those responsible for funding, setting priorities for smaller police departments, and fostering support by the public. One participant said, *“Most people do not realize how critical a problem child pornography is. We conduct seminars and are working on a weekly information section for the newspaper.”* Even if the groups in charge of budgeting for law enforcement services lack financial resources, public support and recognizing the value of law enforcement work in this area may reduce stress by assuring personnel that their work is valued.

6. *Training should encourage bonds among employees, communication by supervisors, and physical exercise.* Rick Anderson, ICAC Program Training Coordinator, and Elizabeth Griffin, Internet behavior consultant, have noted that no or low cost interventions such as communication and exercise can make a big difference in mitigating negative effects of exposure to child pornography. Informal gatherings such as meals and holiday parties can foster a sense of community. Informal check-ins by supervisors can help staff acknowledge and discuss distress when it occurs. Opportunities for discussions can be provided at staff meetings and during case reviews. Physical activities can be fun and relieve stress. Many survey participants noted the value of exercise.

7. *Basic law enforcement academy training should include information about child pornography cases.* Because the Internet has facilitated the spread of this problem worldwide, these crimes touch law enforcement at every level. Providing basic training about how to approach child pornography cases will promote awareness and assure that personnel have some grounding to respond to cases wherever they emerge.

8. *Conduct research to create evidence-based policies and procedures.* Survey participants described a range of negative reactions to work exposure to child pornography. Some of these, such as sexual problems and hyper-vigilance around children seem directly related to viewing images of children being sexually abused. Other reactions could, as some participants noted, arise from the more typical strains of

police work. Research should be aimed at 1) identifying which problems are distinctly related to exposure to child pornography, 2) examining what characteristics or circumstances place some individuals at risk for adverse reactions, and 3) establishing which agency policies and practices best alleviate negative impacts.

**SUMMARY**

This report is only a first step to answering critical questions about the impact of viewing child pornography on law enforcement investigators. The findings suggest that some law enforcement personnel suffer ill effects, while others cope well.

The findings also make clear that some agencies are alert to possible problems and provide employees with information and supports, while others are unaware of potential problems or ill-equipped to deal with them if they happen.

The well-being of personnel who investigate child pornography cases is a matter of concern, not just for compassionate reasons, but also because unrelieved stress can reduce productivity and retention of the specialized and highly trained staff who investigate these crimes. We hope that, in the near future, research will systematically examine what characteristics or circumstances place some individuals at risk for adverse reactions and what agency policies and practices best alleviate negative impacts for those doing this important work.

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