

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD
Police psychologist

Peer Support: Does it Work? Survey Project 2022

A follow up study using the *Peer Support Team Utilization and Outcome Survey* was initiated in late June and concluded mid-July 2022. The same three northern Colorado law enforcement agencies were surveyed using an electronic version of the survey.

Survey methodology 2018/2022

The 2018 survey utilized in-person distribution and collection. An inherent shortcoming of this methodology was that not all survey-eligible employees received a survey. This was because a number of employees were not readily available during the survey project.

In 2022, the survey was distributed to all survey-eligible employees. Each was sent a digital copy via their agency email. Completion of the survey required that recipients open the email, click on the “begin survey” button, respond to survey questions, and click on the “done” button. This last action sent survey responses to data collection. Without it, survey responses were not recorded. Like the 2018 survey, completing the 2022 survey was anonymous and voluntary. Both projects relied upon the willingness of employees to complete the survey.

Survey completion and response rates

The 2022 project distributed 910 surveys to the three participating agencies; 265 were returned. Of these, 255 were returned completed. This represents an overall completed-survey return rate of 28.0%, a far cry from the almost 98% completed survey return rate of the 2018 project. Why such a difference? Foremost, the methodology. It seems that employees were much more willing to return the survey when it was distributed and collected in-person. As to return rates, these projects clearly demonstrate the superiority of in-person survey distribution and collection over an electronic mail survey.

Historically, the return rates of electronically distributed surveys are notoriously low. They average about 33% (Lindemann, 2021). This makes the 2022 combined-agency return rate close to but less than average.

While the combined-agency completed-survey return rate represented 28.0% of those that received the survey, the individual-agency completed-survey return rates varied from a high of 34.7% (148 respondents/426 recipients LCSO), a middle of 28.9% (46/159 LPD), and a low of 18.8% (61/325 FCPS). The reasons for these differences are unclear. Any attempt to specify them without further research is little more than speculation. Regardless, one thing is certain - a significant majority of employees that received the 2022 survey did not return it.

Of the 910 survey recipients, 263 did not open the survey email. Of the 647 recipients that opened the email, 279 (43.1%) clicked the “begin survey” button. Of these, 255 completed the survey, 39.4% of those that opened the email. Was it something about the survey that discouraged over 60% of those that opened the email from completing it? Not likely. The 2022 survey is the same survey that produced a nearly 98% completed-return rate in 2018. Was a program glitch responsible? Not likely, 255 surveys were successfully completed and returned. The reasons for the *opened-versus-completed* disparity remain unknown. What is known is that well over half of the recipients that opened the survey email did not complete the survey.

Completed-survey population composition

The 255 combined-agency employees that returned completed surveys were comprised of 172 (67.5%) sworn and 83 (32.5%) civilian personnel. Of the 83 civilian personnel, 23 (27.7%) were dispatchers/call takers. Years of service: 110 (43.1%) employees reported having over 10 years of service with their agency; 58 (22.7%) reported being employed for under 3 years.

Survey findings

Of the 255 combined-agency employees that completed the survey, 164 (64.3%) reported utilizing their peer support team. [48.3]¹ Of these:

- 139 (84.8%) found peer support to be helpful to very helpful. [88.7]
- 109 (66.5%) were advised of peer support confidentiality limitations. [63.2]
- 132 (80.5%) would seek peer support in the future if needed. [76.4]
- 149 (90.9%) would recommend the peer support team to others. [89.8]
- 107 (65.2%) reported it helped them to better perform their job. [59.2]
- 83 (50.6%) reported it helped them improve home life.² [50.2]

Of the 255 combined-agency employees that completed the survey, 88 (34.5%) reported not having utilized their peer support team [51.7]; 3 were uncertain. Of the 91 (88+3) that reported not having utilized their peer support team or uncertain:

- 68 (74.7%) reported they had not had a need for peer support. [77.1]
- 29 (31.9%) reported that they are not the kind of person that asks for peer support from the peer support team. [13.7]
- 7 (7.7%) reported not knowing how to initiate peer support.³ [3.5]
- 3 (3.3%) reported contacts with peer support team members but were uncertain if their contacts were peer support. [not assessed in 2018]
- 45 (49.5%) reported likely to very likely to seek peer support should stressful circumstances arise. [59.7%]

Of the 255 combined-agency employees that completed the survey:

- 174 (68.2%) reported being contacted and offered peer support by their peer support team. [60.7]
- 55 (21.6%) reported experiencing a work-related incident where they felt they should have been contacted by the peer support team and were not contacted. [20.3]
- 192 (75.3%) reported being confident to very confident in peer support team confidentiality. [76.8]
- 15 (5.9%) indicated they did not know enough about peer support team confidentiality to rate their confidence. [7.7]

¹ Numbers in brackets are percentages of those responding to same item in the 2018 survey.

² 26 respondents cited both: "better perform the job" and "improve home life"

³ Total number of responses to first 3 items are greater than 91 due to several recipients selecting multiple options.

The combined and individual-agency completion rates were insufficient to confidently extrapolate survey results. Although the 2022 survey project provided reliable information about the experiences of those that completed surveys, there is no way to know or reasonably conclude that their responses reflect the sentiments of their agency.

A notable difference between the 2018 and 2022 survey projects was observed in the percentage of those that reported using peer support, 48.3% in 2018 compared to 64.3% in 2022. There is no way to know whether this result represents a true increase in the use of peer support or if it means that those who have used peer support were more likely to complete the 2022 survey. Nonetheless, several proportional values of the 2018 and 2022 survey were remarkably similar.