

**Peer Support: Does it work?**  
**The Efficacy of Law Enforcement Peer Support**

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD  
Police Psychologist

**Peer Support: Does it Work? Survey Project 2018**

Peer support teams within law enforcement agencies have existed for many years. Although many law enforcement officers and police psychologists have advocated for peer support programs, there has been surprisingly little research providing evidence for the efficacy of peer support.

To gather information about the use and outcome of agency peer support, the peer support experiences of employees of three northern Colorado law enforcement agencies, Fort Collins Police Services, Larimer County Sheriff's Office, and Loveland Police Department, were assessed utilizing the *Peer Support Team Utilization and Outcome Survey*. The peer support teams of each agency are well established, similarly structured, and function under the oversight of a licensed mental health professional. Each member of the peer support teams was initially trained within the Police Peer Support Team Training program.

The applied methodology for Survey distribution and collection produced a return of 644 surveys. This represented approximately 77.9% of the survey-eligible population. Of the 644 surveys collected, 631 were returned completed (76.3% of the survey-eligible population).

The rate of return and the resulting data is sufficiently robust to reasonably conclude that had all survey-eligible employees completed the Survey, there would not be meaningful differences in outcome proportional values. The likelihood of this improves confidence in the extrapolation of survey results to all law enforcement agencies with similarly trained and organized peer support teams. The extension of survey results to law enforcement agencies that maintain peer support teams with alternative training and structure, and to non-law enforcement first responder and other agencies, can only be done with confidence limitations.

*Use of Peer Support*

Nearly one-half of surveyed employees reported participation in peer support interactions. Of the 631 employees that completed the survey, 305 (48.3%) reported having participated in peer support.

*Reasons for Non-use of Peer Support*

The most frequently identified reason for the non-use of peer support was "I have not had a need for peer support" (77.1%). This was followed by "I'm not the kind of person that asks for peer support from peer support team members" (13.7%). Several respondents cited both of the above reasons. There were no meaningful associations between the reasons for non-use of peer support and years of service.

These findings suggest: (1) that years of service is less a factor in the utilization of peer support than the perceived need for peer support, and (2) personality and personal perceptions are a factor for some employees that choose not to engage peer support.

## *Survey Findings*

1. Peer support is helpful for a remarkable majority of those that have used it. Nearly 9 out of 10 employees that reported peer support interactions stated that peer support was helpful to very helpful in addressing the issues discussed or managing the stress associated with the issues. Nearly 8 out of 10 employees reported that they would seek peer support again in the event of future stressful circumstances, while nearly 9 out of 10 employees reported that they would recommend peer support to co-workers known to be dealing with stressful circumstances. Over one-half of those that participated in peer support reported that it had directly or indirectly helped them to better perform their job and/or improve their home life.
2. Nearly 6 out of 10 employees that reported not having participated in peer support interactions stated that they would be likely to very likely to seek peer support should future stressful circumstances arise. This finding reflects the positive standing of the peer support teams within their agencies - even with those that reported not having used peer support.
3. There is significant employee confidence in the confidentiality peer support team interactions. This is likely the result of three factors: (1) agency peer support policy, peer support team operational guidelines, and Colorado statute CRS 13-90-107(m), which provides for peer support team member confidentiality, (2) the consistent exemplary behavior of peer support team members and their adherence to the above mentioned documents and the peer support team code of ethical conduct, and (3) the steadfast support of agency administrators and supervisors.
4. Greater consistency is needed in the area of advising or reminding peer support recipients of the limits of peer support confidentiality before engaging in peer support. Disclosing or reviewing the limits of peer support confidentiality is an ethical obligation of all peer support teams wishing to do the best they can for recipients of peer support.
5. The peer support teams have done well with reaching out to employees and offering peer support when appropriate. However, survey results revealed that about 2 in 10 employees reported that they had experienced work-related circumstances where they felt they should have been contacted by the peer support team and were not contacted. This information suggests that peer support teams may need to reexamine their "threshold" for peer support outreach. It is possible that some employees are more stressed by their involvement in particular events wherein neither the event nor their involvement would normally generate a peer support contact. It is also possible that the event never came to the attention of the peer support team or that individual employees, especially if on the "periphery" of an incident, were simply missed and not included in peer support efforts. Special attention in any threshold and outreach reexamination should be given to civilian employees, particularly agency dispatchers, evidence and lab technicians, and records personnel.

The present study supports the use and efficacy of agency peer support. Peer support provided by trained and clinically supervised members of peer support teams has been shown to be a significant resource for those that use it. It has also been shown to be a significant potential resource for those that have not used it. Law enforcement agencies without a peer support team would be well advised to consider developing one.

Agency peer support programs have become an integral part of “best practices” for sustaining employee wellness. To help employees better manage the unavoidable stressors of policing, the cumulative effects of work-related stress, and the trauma frequently associated with law enforcement critical incidents, there is simply no substitute for a well-trained, appropriately structured, clinically supervised peer support team.

Why peer support? Peer support teams occupy a support niche that cannot be readily filled by either health plan counseling services or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This is because well trained peer support teams provide support that is qualitatively different than that provided by health insurance therapists or EAP counselors. In fact, peer support teams provide support that it is qualitatively different from the counseling of even the best police psychologists. The difference? The *power of the peer*. The power of the peer is the factor that is a constant in the support provided by peer support team members. It is the factor that is not present in other support modalities. If an agency wishes to do the best it can to support its employees, a peer support program is necessary.

### **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]<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> [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.<sup>3</sup> [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]

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

<sup>2</sup> 26 respondents cited both: "better perform the job" and "improve home life"

<sup>3</sup> 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. (From: Digliani, J.A. (2023). *Reflections of a Police Psychologist: Primary Considerations in Policing*, 3rd edition.)

For more information and to view or download the complete 2018 survey report visit [www.jackdigliani.com](http://www.jackdigliani.com).