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C27 Assessing the Psychological Well-Being and Coping Mechanisms for Law Enforcement Investigators and Digital Forensic Examiners of Child Pornography Investigations

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the significant differences of psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and coping mechanisms for individuals working as either digital forensic examiners and/or investigators of cases involving child pornography.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting this first study to assess the psychological well-being, as well as attitudes toward psychological services, for individuals working as either digital forensic examiners and/or investigators of cases involving child pornography.

The United States has seen an increase in the number of law enforcement officers investigating child pornography cases as well as the number of digital forensic examiners involved in the analysis of child pornography-related digital evidence.¹ Specialized task forces or units that focus on child pornography cases exist. Some are nationwide, such as the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task force, whereas others exist at the state or local level. In some units, there is a clear division of labor — computer forensic examiners analyze and index the child pornography collections, while the investigators work directly with the offender and the victim/family; however, in other units, the investigators are also the examiners, meaning they not only work alongside the offender and/or victim, but they also analyze the digital evidence in child pornography cases. Overall, criminal justice occupations are associated with high work stress leading to psychological illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety) and high turnover rates, especially for officers dealing with child investigations.^{2,3} Previous research has assessed the level of job satisfaction and coping mechanisms for digital forensic examiners; however, research has yet to compare the psychological well being of individuals who work as either digital forensics examiners, investigators, or both, while working child pornography cases.

The current study was the first to compare the psychological well being, job satisfaction, coping mechanisms (i.e., strategies for dealing with stress), and attitudes toward psychological treatment (e.g., therapy) for individuals working as either digital forensics examiners and/or investigators of child pornography cases. This study had three specific goals: (1) explore the psychological wellbeing and job satisfaction; (2) identify any differences in coping mechanisms; and, (3) assess attitudes toward psychological treatment as well as the availability of psychological resources for examiners/investigators working child pornography cases.

A snowball sample of law enforcement officers and digital forensic examiners were solicited to participate in the anonymous, online survey through a variety of means, including the ICAC task force listserv. Based on their current, self-reported duties, 20 respondents were classified as digital forensic examiners only, 71 respondents as investigators only, and 38 respondents as both digital forensics examiners and investigators of cases involving internet child pornography. Results suggested significant differences in the psychological well being, job satisfaction, and coping mechanisms for individuals working as either digital forensic examiners and/or investigators of cases involving child pornography.

The results will be fully discussed as well as suggestions for future research.

Digital Forensics, Law Enforcement, Child Pornography

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