



Emotional and Psychological Coping Mechanisms Among Workers Handling Cases of Child Sexual Abuse: An Exploratory Study of Resource Use by Professionals in Germany



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ABSTRACT

Background: Child sexual abuse (CSA) can pose emotional and psychological challenges for professionals in the criminal justice and child protection sectors, especially when they have direct contact with survivors. While international research has examined the impact on professionals' well-being and their coping resources, German studies on the matter are limited.

Objective: To address this gap, we conducted expert interviews with professionals from the criminal justice and child protection sectors in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein.

Participants: We interviewed 13 professionals in the field of criminal justice and 15 child protection professionals, specifically those who had direct contact with CSA cases, such as in counselling sessions, child protection assessments, or forensic interviews.

Findings: We identified differences in the use of personal, professional, and organisational coping resources. Child protection professionals generally benefit from stronger organisational support, whereas criminal justice professionals report inconsistent access to workplace resources.

Conclusion: The mandatory and partially employer-funded resources in Schleswig-Holstein contrast with international recommendations for broader organizational support. Our results demonstrate that mandatory resource use in the child protection sector can inform enhancements to resource use in the criminal justice field. They also indicate that interdisciplinary cooperation can benefit professionals addressing CSA cases.

Key Words: *Child Sexual Abuse, Criminal Justice Sector, Child Protection Sector, Coping Mechanism, Mental Health*

Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) cases are primarily handled by professionals in the criminal justice and child protection sectors. The routine handling of CSA cases can expose these workers to various emotional and psychological challenges. To date, studies of such challenges and their potential outcomes for CSA caseworkers have mainly focused on burnout and secondary traumatization (STS) as key health problems (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Fansher et al., 2000; Foley et al., 2024; Fuseini, 2024; Hurrell et al. 2018; Perron & Hiltz, 2006; Sheehan et al., 2024). At the same time, professionals talking to children and adolescents affected by CSA must be able to regulate their emotions and maintain a composed demeanour, especially during sensitive interactions like child protection assessments or forensic interviews.

Hershkowitz et al. (2007) found that strong emotional reactions or displays of personal distress by parents can discourage children from disclosing abuse – a finding that may similarly apply to professionals in disclosure settings. Meanwhile, a calm, steady approach of professionals fosters a sense of safety and encourages young people to share about their experiences (Lemaigre et al., 2017; Priebe & Svedin, 2008).

Considering Fansher et al.'s (2020) finding that burnout primarily derives from work-related issues like inadequate organizational support, researchers have sought to identify strategies that limit such challenges. Thus, Powell et al. (2014) differentiate between individual and organizational coping resources, while Hunter and Schofield's (2006) note “the complex interplay of personal, professional, and organizational resources” (p. 134). Within this context

personal resources include work-life balance, social contacts, and physical activity; professional resources include personal therapy, and knowledge acquisition; and organizational resources include supervision, debriefing, and workload management (Hunter & Schofield, 2006).

In the next section, we outline the theoretical framework. First, we present an overview of well-being and resources reported in the criminal justice sector, then those in child protection. We follow Hunter and Schofield's (2006) classification, grouping resources into personal, professional, and organizational categories. Finally, we provide an overview of the specific German context.

Resources for criminal justice professionals working on CSA cases

Although professionals in the justice sector must regulate their emotions, many report that working with CSA survivors is emotionally challenging. The main challenge for professionals includes supporting child survivors who hesitate to disclose abuse and feeling that they cannot prevent further harm in certain cases. The latter challenge often leads to feelings of inadequacy among forensic interviewers (Fansher et al., 2020). Thus, Fansher et al. (2020) link burnout to work-related factors like overwhelming responsibilities, lack of organizational support, and exposure to CSA material (CSAM). Hurrell et al. (2018) found that increased exposure – such as by interviewing suspected perpetrators in addition to adult and child survivors of CSA – correlates with higher STS in police officers. Perron and Hiltz (2006) associate job satisfaction with burnout and STS in forensic interviewers. Foley et al. (2024) examined UK police officers

investigating rape, sexual exploitation, and CSA. While most officers showed only minimal to mild symptoms, a significant subgroup experienced serious mental health consequences: 22.9 % had potentially clinical posttraumatic stress disorder, 26.1 % had moderate to severe anxiety, 34.6 % had moderate to severe depression, and 12.7 % met clinical levels for all three.

Research has identified several personal, professional, and organizational resources that benefit professionals working in the criminal justice system. For example, studies reveal that such professionals can benefit from personal resources including social support, hobbies and physical activities, humour, work-life balance, appreciation of one's work, and religion (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014). These studies emphasize the relevance of individual character traits, resilience (Powell et al., 2014), and especially social support (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014). Nevertheless, Seigfried-Spellar (2018) finds that participants seldom seek social support instead, they distract themselves in various ways, such as going shopping, exercising, or working harder than usual around the house or at work. Other studies describe unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as increased substance abuse (Powell et al., 2014; Seigfried-Spellar, 2018). In terms of professional resources, research has underscored the benefits of applying specific strategies to CSAM analysis, and receiving psychological support provided by professionals with expertise in police work (Powell et al., 2014; Seigfried-Spellar, 2018). Finally, research frequently highlights the positive impact of organizational resources, such as social support in the form of formal and informal debriefings. (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014). Other useful

resources noted in the literature include access to supervision, internal psychological support services, and control over one's workload (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014).

Studies also note challenges associated with the use of resources. For instance, seeking help may be perceived by employees as stigmatizing (Foley et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2014; Seigfried-Spellar, 2018). Seigfried-Spellar (2018) suggests that psychosocial resources must be made readily available to counteract workers' stigmatisation, indifference, or lack of awareness regarding the available support options. However, the high costs of this approach make it potentially unfeasible.

Resources for child protection professionals working on CSA cases

While research on CSA casework among child protection workers is emerging, studies on their well-being remain relatively scarce. In Anderson's (2000) study of burnout rates among 151 child protection workers handling various forms of child abuse, more than half of the participants reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, which is considered a core aspect of burnout. However, the child protection workers scored more moderately on the other two scales, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Anderson, 2000). An interview study by Fuseini (2024) with 18 child welfare social workers, some of whom were working on CSA cases, found that all commonly experience stress from factors such as caseloads, the need to enforce intrusive measures or court orders, and a sense of failure when client needs cannot be met. Sheehan et al. (2024) reviewed eight studies on health and social care professionals working with CSA, including

social workers (n = 7), counsellors (n = 5), and marriage and family therapists (n = 2). The review found that these professionals commonly experience vicarious traumatisation, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue.

The following paragraph summarises previous empirical findings on resources among child protection professionals. In terms of personal resources, the presence of social support within one's personal environment is a recurring theme (Anderson, 2000; Beer et al., 2021; Hunter & Schofield, 2006). Additionally, vicarious resilience, gained from the therapist's exposure to their clients' resilience to sexual abuse, has also been identified for its positive effects (Silveira & Boyer, 2015) along with staying physically active, achieving a work-life balance, cultivating hobbies (Beer et al., 2021; Hunter & Schofield, 2006; Fuseini, 2024), and expressing emotions (Anderson, 2000). Meanwhile, studies highlight substance abuse (Beer et al., 2021), problem avoidance, and self-criticism (Anderson, 2000) as some coping strategies reported in the literature. Professional resources identified as relevant include problem-solving skills (Anderson, 2000), work experience, enhancing knowledge, using coping strategies during sessions (Hunter & Schofield, 2006), and receiving personal therapy (Beer et al., 2021; Hunter & Schofield, 2006). Finally, organisational resources described in the literature include social support, effective caseload management, and supervision (Beer et al., 2021; Choi, 2011; Hunter & Schofield, 2006; Fuseini, 2024). Choi (2011) highlights the access to strategic information and organisational resources, as well as the workplace cultures addressing mental well-being. Formal and informal debriefings, and

external therapy provided by the workplace are also described by Hunter and Schofield (2006).

Processing CSA cases in Germany - resources and support system for professionals

In cases of CSA, interdisciplinary collaboration in cases of CSA primarily aims to ensure child protection through coordinated prevention and intervention efforts. In Germany, suspected cases are addressed by representatives of various institutions, including those from child protection services (e.g., youth welfare offices, counselling centres, and psychosocial support personnel in criminal trials) and the criminal justice system (e.g., police, prosecutors, attorneys). Effective child protection, therefore, requires successful cooperation among all professions involved (Krüger & Niehaus, 2016). The structures that facilitate such collaboration in Germany are detailed in Eilfgang et al. (2024). However, organizational support for the mental well-being of these professionals in Germany varies widely across occupational groups.

Under Article 15 of the Istanbul Convention (which Germany ratified on October 12, 2017) state criminal justice systems should provide regular training to ensure the appropriate treatment of survivors of violence (Istanbul Convention, 2011). However, the convention does not include measures to protect or promote the mental health of the professionals involved. At the German national level, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues (UBSKM) outlined practical guidelines, including child-friendly criteria for criminal proceedings and

recommendations for police, prosecutors, and judges. In addition to mandatory training, the government bodies recommend that professionals regularly use supervision as a supportive measure to mitigate work-related stress. However, participation is voluntary, as the guideline can only issue recommendations and cannot obligate employers to provide supervision nor require employees to receive it (BMFSFJ & UBSKM, 2021). Specific provisions regarding attorneys do not appear to be included.

In the 17th Child and Youth Report, the BMFSFJ calls on public welfare services to ensure that professionals, including those in youth welfare offices (YWOs), are not overburdened and that they work within efficient organisations that provide adequate support. This support includes recognition of their social role, fair compensation, legal and professional protections, and access to expert counselling, supervision, and training. In this context, organisational resources – like supervision and training – are considered part of the professional safeguarding of staff; they are intended to help staff manage demanding cases, uphold professional standards, and maintain their ability to respond appropriately to the rights and needs of young people (BMFSFJ, 2024). It should be noted, however, that the guideline only refers to “access”; it does not guarantee the provision of free resources. This phrasing indicates that employees should be able to use such services, but the related costs or funding arrangements are not addressed. Beckmann et al. (2018) report an unexpectedly high prevalence of supervision within YWOs based on responses from 199 professionals across 45 YWOs. The findings indicate that 93% of respondents receive supervision, with 45% receiving it monthly.

Most respondents receive team or case supervision approximately four times per year. Similarly, Klomann et al. (2019) found in interviews with staff from four YWO, that they valued supervision to address challenging cases, though some noted gaps in availability of supervision. Their findings reveal critical shortcomings, as supervision is not consistently or systematically implemented across YWOs.

Psychosocial support personnel in criminal trials (PCS) represents the most recently established professional group in child protection which was introduced by law on January 1, 2017. PCS professionals are now a permanent feature of specialist counselling centres alongside other counselling services. This professional group is therefore also considered in this article. Positioned at the intersection of psychosocial services and the justice system, PCS provides intensive, non-legal support to survivors before, during, and after criminal proceedings. PCS may also attend hearings and interviews together with the victims. From the perspective of professional well-being, this occupational group is notable because, in some federal states, PCS has a distinct status and receives certain resources mandated by law. For instance, state regulations in Schleswig-Holstein explicitly require supervision, peer counselling, self-reflection methods, and burnout prevention as measures for quality assurance and self-care (§1 (5) AGPsychPbGVO). Specific provisions regarding professionals of counselling centres do not appear to be included.

Although there are general studies and guidelines in Germany regarding resources (e.g., Beckmann et al., 2018; Klomann et al., 2019; BMFSFJ, 2024), there are no studies focused on the preventative and

interventional resources used by CSA caseworkers. This is despite the evidence from international studies described earlier, which shows that access to organisational resources can help CSA professionals cope with the emotional demands of this field. Given the unique challenges faced by CSA caseworkers, an initial exploratory analysis must be conducted in the German context to identify gaps and understand current practices used by this specialised group of professionals.

Study aim

The primary goal of our study is to provide an initial exploratory overview of the resources employed by professionals working in Germany's criminal justice and child protection sectors to cope with CSA cases. We address the following questions:

1. What personal, professional, and organizational resources do these professionals from different sectors mention as aids to help them cope with the potential emotional and psychological challenges of handling CSA cases?
2. How does the availability and use of these resources differ among professionals in the child protection sector versus those in the criminal justice sector?
3. How can these resources be enhanced?

Methodology

The interviews explored how professionals manage and collaborate on CSA cases, considering this paper's focus on the resources they use to prevent or mitigate psychological and emotional stress. We opted for an exploratory, semi-structured expert

interview format that gave interviewees the opportunity to cite helpful resources without being influenced by the interviewers' preconceptions (Bogner et al., 2014; Misoch, 2019). We developed a new interview guide for this study, based on Kruse's (2013) recommendations for qualitative guide construction. The guide was tailored to CSA casework and tested under real-world conditions in two pretest phases with N = 8 participants. The pretest interviews were solely used to refine the guide; they were not analysed for this paper. This procedure ensured that the questions were understandable, relevant, and capable of eliciting detailed responses.

This paper focuses on data related to resources that respondents used and perceived as helpful when responding to suspected CSA. We explored how respondents manage the psychological and emotional strain that may arise in this context by asking them the following:

What measures do you personally take to prevent any potential psychological or emotional stress when dealing with child sexual abuse?

- How does your institution address potential psychological stress for colleagues?
- Are there any measures or support that deal specifically with child sexual abuse?
- Can you elaborate with an example?
- What additional measures or support would you like to see?
- Do you see room for improving the measures or support in [your institution]? If yes, what improvements?

Our interviews also addressed other issues, including the handling of suspected

cases, collaboration with other professionals, and crime reporting. Some results have already been published (Bayer et al., 2025; Eilfgang et al., 2024).

Recruitment and Sample

This study forms part of a wider research project involving 50 interviews conducted in German in the state of Schleswig-Holstein between November 10, 2021, and January 13, 2023. We employed a purposive sampling method to include relevant professionals dealing with CSA in Germany. For example, the broader sample also includes teachers and other professionals with varying levels of expertise in handling CSA cases. For the present paper, however, we focus on two groups of professionals working with CSA cases on a daily basis. We chose these groups because we sought to examine how they use specific resources to address CSA as part of their regular work. The two groups, which comprise 28 of the initial 50 interviews, are as follows:

1. Professionals from the criminal justice systems, including prosecutors, police officers and attorneys ($n = 13$); and
2. Child protection professionals, including workers in the Youth Welfare Office, counselling centres, and psychosocial support personnel in criminal trials ($n = 15$)

We conducted potential interviewees via written correspondence, and participation was voluntary.

The interviews were conducted on site by the interviewees or using the online video communication software WebEx, depending on each interviewee's preference. Of the 28 interviews analysed in this paper, five were conducted online, and 23 were in person. After analysing the interview material, we

determined that additional interviews with legal professionals were needed to increase the sample size for that group. Accordingly, we planned five additional interviews with attorneys, three of which were conducted.

The two interview groups were selected due to their frequent and direct involvement with CSA cases. We chose the participants because they regularly engage with child and adolescent survivors in their professional roles (e.g., through counselling sessions, child protection assessments, or forensic interviews), ensuring firsthand experience with the complexities of such work. To describe the sample description, we collected basic sociodemographic data from all interviewees using a short questionnaire that was completed immediately before each interview, alongside the consent process. The questionnaire served solely to provide a description of the sample, with the interviewee data presented in Table 1 ($N = 28$).

TABLE 1. Sociodemographic data.

Profession	Gender	Age (mean, range)	Field experience (mean, range)
Child Protection Sector (n = 15)			
5 youth welfare officials (YWO)	1 male 4 female	45.4 years 31–56 years	16.0 years 2–30 years
5 counselling centre personnel (CC)	2 male 3 female	45.4 years 32–54 years	11.2 years 3–16 years
5 psychosocial support personnel in criminal trials (PCS)	5 female	47.6 years 30–63 years	10.2 years 1–25 years
Criminal Justice Sector (n = 13)			
5 police officers (Po)	3 male 2 female	45 years 34–64 years	24.2 years 15–38 years
5 prosecutors (Pr)	1 male 4 female	48.6 years 32–68 years	12.3 years 6–30 years
3 attorneys (At)	1 male 2 female	51.3 years 44–59 years	17.0 years 10–27 years

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, we used a structured qualitative content analysis as described by Kuckartz (2018). We classified resources using the framework provided by Hunter and Schofield (2006), which proved beneficial in the development of our initial deductive main categories and potential subcategories. The system was used to code the initial interviews, with one code assigned per occupational group. We utilized the deductive categories (i.e., those derived from existing theory or previous research) to code the initial interviews. For example, we placed supervision in the *organizational resources* and training in the *professional resources* category. This coding led to modifications in some deductive subcategories (e.g., formal and informal team debriefings were originally combined but were then split in our analysis) and the introduction of new inductive subcategories (i.e., those emerging directly from our interview data), such as hobbies or retrospectively needed resources. The category system was coded consensually by our project team, resulting in the categories of resources used by the professionals in question displayed in table 2.

To ensure the plausibility of our text passage classifications, one third of the data was coded by an additional researcher to calculate the intercoder agreement. This individual was a research assistant for our project with prior experience in qualitative data analysis and prior exposure to the topic of CSA, ensuring credibility in the coding process. To calculate kappa, we determined coding units in advance following the recommendation of Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). The resulting kappa of $\kappa = 0.83$, can be considered as an excellent intercoder agreement (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

Research ethics and participant consent

The research project, including this study, was approved by the Ethics Committee of the German Educational Research Association (GERA/DGfE; No: 05/2021/DGfE). Prior to conducting the interviews, we obtained written informed consent from all participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, we informed participants about the content in advance and offered support if needed.

TABLE 2. System of categorisation; for detailed definitions of categories, see the results chapter.

Main categories	Subcategories
Personal resources* ¹	Emotional resilience
	Work-life balance* ¹
	Hobbies
	Social support* ¹
Professional resources*	Training* ¹
	Specialized consulting* ¹
	Improvement
Organisational resources*	Supervision*
	Formal team debriefing* ¹
	Informal team debriefing* ¹
	Working conditions
	Counselling
	Psychotherapeutic intervention
	Improvement
	Not available
	Unnecessary
	Retrospectively needed

Note. Categories marked with * were taken from Hunter & Schofield (deductive), with *¹ indicating slight modifications in the wording or division of subcategories. Inductive subcategories emerged from the interview data, capturing aspects excluded from the original framework.

Results

Resources were classified as personal, professional, or organisational. At the start of each chapter, we use figures to provide a comparative overview of the resources reported by professionals, based solely on the occurrence of these categories in the interviews. We then explain each resource sub-category in more detail, first for the

criminal justice sector and then for the child protection sector. The interviews were conducted in German, and all quotations were translated into English and proofread by a native English speaker. The interview data is cited using abbreviations for professions, as well as individual and segment numbers to ensure the transparency and traceability of the data. The abbreviations (e.g., Po = Police) are defined in Table 1.

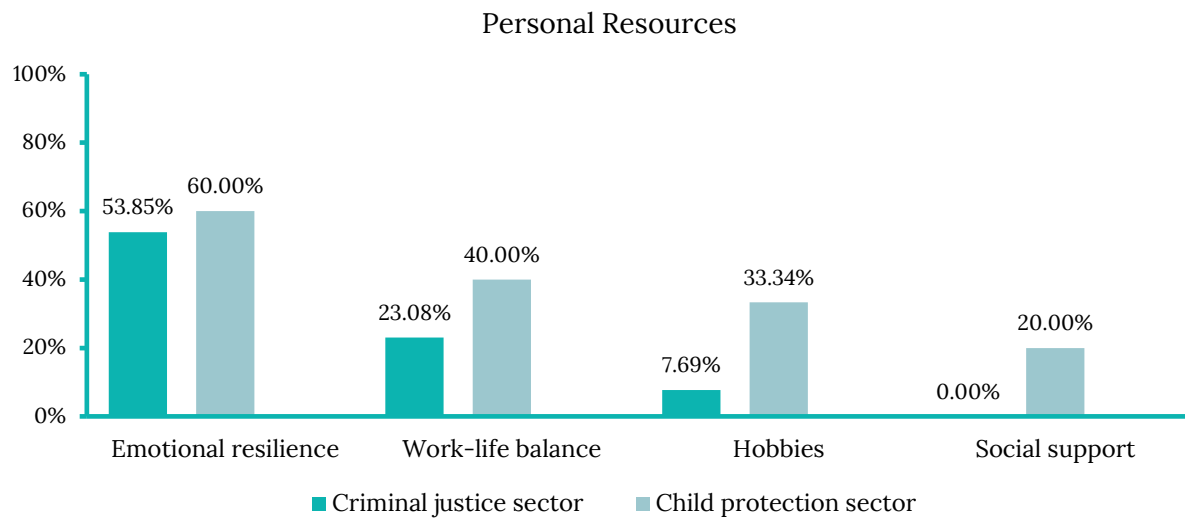
Main category 1: Personal resources

This category includes the personal skills and resources professionals use to cope with work-related psychological difficulties. Figure 1 shows how the professionals from the criminal justice and child protection sectors responded to each subcategory.

The subcategory emotional resilience includes all references to the respondent's psychological resilience while handling CSA cases. Within the criminal justice sector, emotional resilience was seen as a professional requisite (At03/90–92). Many reports underscored that resilience is developed over time, despite encountering multiple distressing moments. Some participants described such moments as inherent to the job (At01/76, Pr01/144, Pr04/76, Po03/74, PO05/60).

One prosecutor described the importance of professional distance:

“[...] but it is of course a certain professional handling of this matter. That's why everyone here views these child pornography shots, and everyone can tolerate it if it doesn't go beyond the normal range.” (Pr04/76)

Figure 1. Personal resources mentioned by interviewees.

Note. Due to the difference in sample size for the law/justice ($n = 13$) versus child protection ($n = 15$) groups, the calculations reflect the relative number for each group

Child protection professionals emphasised that anyone working in the field must have a certain degree of emotional resilience (YWO02/114, YWO03/100, CC02/67, CC05/60, PCS03/40, PCS04/24). They noted that some cases can be compartmentalised and "just tucked aside," while others cannot (PCS02/46, PCS03/40, PCS04/24). One person describes emotional resilience as follows:

"Of course, one is always affected, that's something different. But it's not your own suffering. And if you haven't made that clear for yourself, you can't do this counselling work for long. It's really important to leave that there. To leave the suffering there, too." (PCS04/24)

The subcategory work-life balance includes all statements referencing the person's efforts to separate work from personal life. In the criminal justice group two police officers and one prosecutor reported leaving their professional burdens at work

rather than bringing them home (Po02/72, Po03/74, Pr03/122). Child protection professionals stressed the importance of separating the two areas and refraining from taking work home (CC02/67, PCS01/80, YWO01/106, YWO02/114). A PCS described the effort to maintain a work-life balance as follows:

"When you work in this field, and you tell people about it, they often come up with their own cases. And then I always do the following: "Okay, we'll make an appointment, and then you'll come to me at the counselling centre. But we don't talk about it now while cooking dinner or anything like that. I don't want that." (PCS01/80)

The subcategory hobbies includes all references to the benefits of leisure activities. A police officer mentioned their efforts to create a space for distraction and exercise (Po03/74). One of the YWOs, one described their interest in reading, cooking, biking, and

hiking (YWO01/106); another reported using gardening to counterbalance work-related stress (YWO02/114). One PCS noted that they go for a walk after “bad” trials (PCS02/46), while another emphasised the overall importance of leisure activities (PCS05/76).

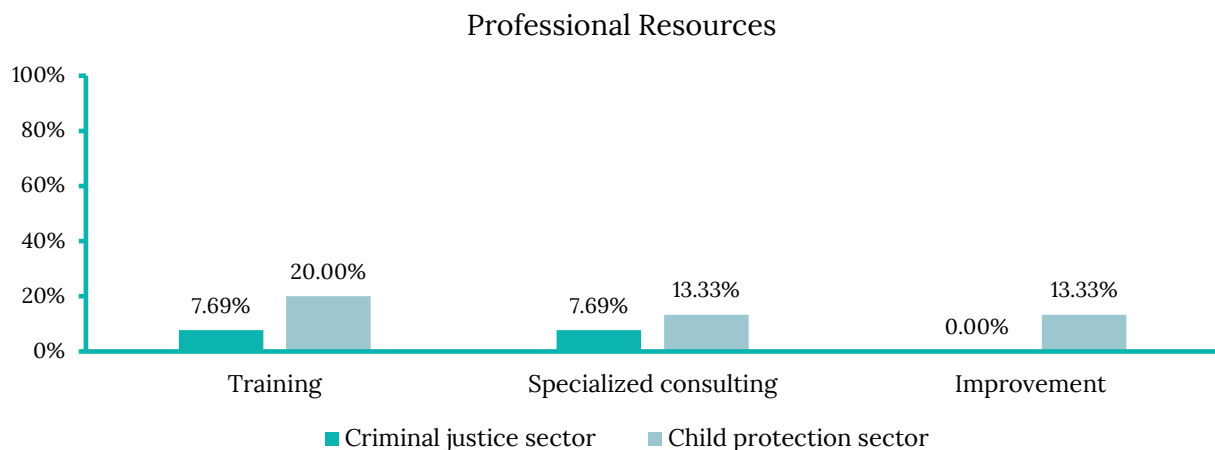
Social support includes all interview passages that mention the person’s interaction with their social environment as a form of emotional compensation. None of those in the criminal justice group made statements that fit this category. However, several child protection professionals described the importance of family and friends as a counterbalance for their work (YWO01/106, CC01/72, PCS05/76). One respondent noted the following:

“[...] And on the weekends, for get-togethers with friends. Of course, depending on your friends, the environment is sometimes also strongly shaped by your own field of work, I would say. Of course, you have to make sure that the topics are not the same.” (YWO01/106)

Main category 2: Professional resources

As a main category, professional resources includes those that individuals report using to prevent or compensate for work-related psychological challenges. Figure 2 shows how the participants responded to each of the subcategories:

Figure 1. Professional resources mentioned by the interviewees.



Note. Due to the difference in sample size for the law/justice ($n = 13$) versus child protection ($n = 15$) groups, the calculations reflect the relative number for each group.

Training refers to respondents’ references to further education or training courses that address possible job-related challenges. In the criminal justice sector, a police officer reported completing a special training course focused on CSA. In addition to addressing CSAM-related issues, the training also covered individual stress perceptions,

boundary recognition, and professionalism (Po01/21/25). Meanwhile, among participants in the child protection sector, one counselling centre staff member and one PCS noted the potential burdens within their educational work or in the context of additional qualifications (CC02/67, PCS03/40). As one participant explained,

their additional qualifications allows them to reconsider their approach and manage expectations:

“We have so many additional qualifications, and sometimes it's really about taking a small step back and getting away from your own need to act. So, we also try to compensate for our powerlessness by acting and by making it clear to ourselves: sometimes it's just not doable.” (PCS3/40)

One YWO worker and one counselling centre professional reported considerable benefits from receiving targeted training on CSA (YWO02/42/116-118, CC05/60).

The subcategory *specialised consultation* encompasses respondent references to the pursuit of support from specialised external consultation services while handling a suspected CSA case. The focus in this category is how counselling can give individuals the confidence required to independently handle and cope with CSA cases. In the criminal justice sector, one police officer noted their efforts to obtain external advice from a credibility assessor. Their aim in doing so was to reflect on and improve their interview techniques with survivors – and to thereby avoid repeating mistakes that might otherwise be addressed only during court proceedings (Po01/13). Within the child protection group, two professionals from the YWO mentioned that they would seek support from CSA-specialized counselling centres, to gain with

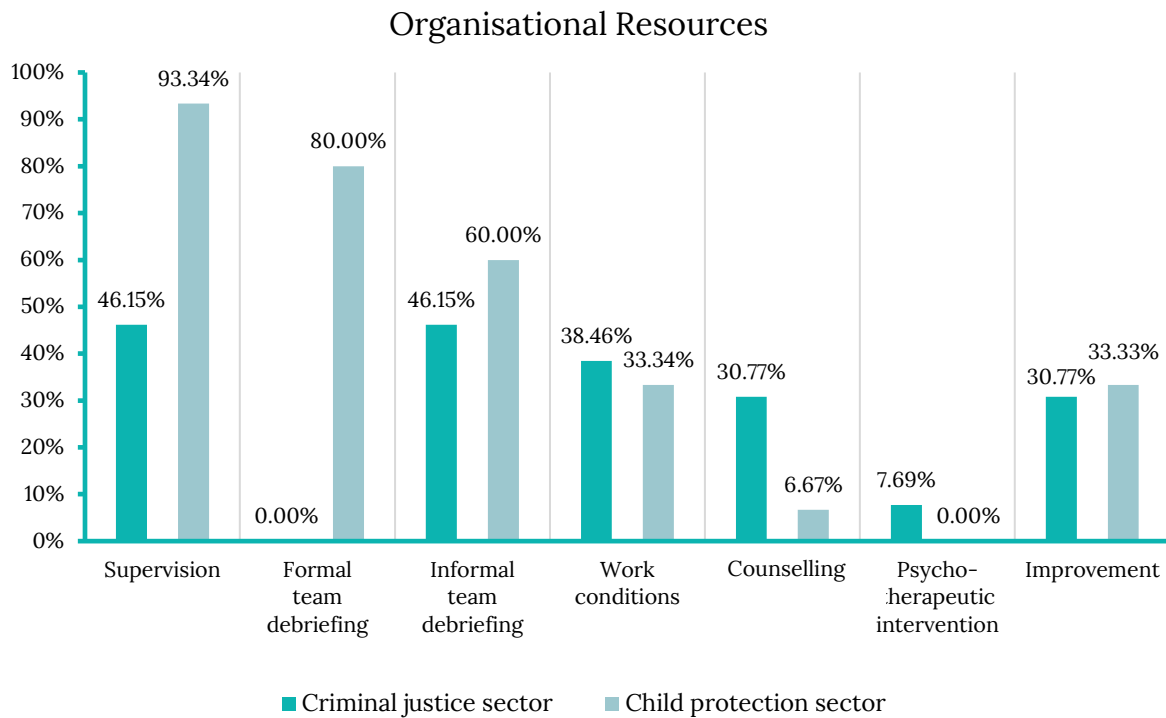
the confidence and guidance needed for independent case management as well as to discuss next steps, external specialized consultation helps them make informed decisions, reflect on cases, and discuss their emotional responses (YWO02/114, YWO04/24).

Respondents also made suggestions for improvement. However, the legal/judicial group made no statements in this category. Counselling centre and YWO workers stressed the need to address CSA early on in educational programs (YWO01/124, CC02/69):

“Actually, I think that the subject should be covered already at the university. So sexual abuse is a very important issue and for many it is a taboo. [...] And to be sensitized to that, and maybe even to realize for yourself, these are issues, I don't want to do that, and this is/or I can't do that [handling CSA cases]. Can I do this job at all, or what do I have to do to do it?” (YWO01/124)

Main category 3: Organisational resources

The category *organisational resources* includes all references to resources provided by the workplace to prevent or compensate for work-related psychological barriers. Figure 3 shows the number of participants who responded to the subcategories.

Figure 2. Organisational resources mentioned by the interviewees.

Note. Due to the difference in sample size for the law/justice ($n = 13$) versus child protection ($n = 15$) groups, the calculations reflect the relative number for each group.

Many respondents reported having access to employer-facilitated (internal or external) supervision. Some participants in the criminal justice group reported the availability of regular, optional supervision (Pr03/120, Pr05/98, Po01/21/27, Po03/76, PO04/31, Po05/62). It was not clear whether individuals use this resource for specific cases. Two participants reported that supervision groups were offered in the past but since been discontinued (Pr01/153, Pr04/72).

One attorney noted that they would seek supervision if they felt overwhelmed, but they had not yet needed to do so (At01/76). Another attorney, a self-employed professional, reported paying privately for supervision once a month (At02/70). In the child protection group, several practitioners reported engaging in regular mandatory supervision, with the frequency varying from once a month to four times per year (YWO01/107-122, YWO02/116, YWO03/100,

YWO04/24/102, YWO05/98, CC01/72, CC02/67, CC03/44, PCS01/22/80, PCS03/38, PCS04/24, PCS05/76). One YWO worker summarised it as follows:

“So, for the colleagues, I can say that we insist that there really is regular, if not monthly, supervision. [...] But the colleagues also know that there is the possibility of one-to-one supervision.” (YWO03/100)

In addition, several participants noted the availability of individual supervision on demand (YWO01/120, YWO03/100, PCS01/80). Lastly, two child protection workers mentioned their aversion to permanent supervision, but stressed that they could request it if necessary (CC04/66, PCS02/46).

Formal team debriefing includes references to a workplace commitment to facilitate a fixed, formal exchange among team members or across various professional domains. In the

child protection group, some individuals recommended the use of structured team meetings (CC03/44), collegial case consultations (YWO05/98-102, PCS03/38) or intervention (CC01/72, PCS02/46, PCS04/24, PCS05/76) – a formal, structured peer-led consultation process – to address work-related challenges. One of those individuals noted the following:

“We have regular supervision and intervention. That's actually a must in counselling. [...] It's really important to be able to take care of yourself. Which is sometimes not so easy.” (PCS04/24)

Many in the YWO group reported distributing cases through the “four-eyes principle”, whereby at least two professionals collaborate on each case to ensure thorough handling and minimize the risk of overlooking important information (YWO03/100, YWO04/102, YWO05/66/98) or – in cases where the child’s welfare was at risk – involving the division manager (YWO04/24, YWO05/102).

Informal team debriefing includes all references to the use of conversations with colleagues to cope with CSA. Respondents from the legal/judicial group described the need for collegial interaction and case discussion (At01/78-80, Pr02/155, Pr03/120, Pr05/98, Po03/74, Po05/62). One prosecutor underscored the benefits of interacting with colleagues who share similar experience. In such cases, they noted, issues can be discussed immediately; they do not need to wait for “a crisis intervention in a week” (Pr02/155). Similarly, one attorney noted the importance of speaking with other attorneys working in the field:

“But what also helps me is when I, without talking specifically about the case, because as a lawyer I am not allowed to do that, but when I can talk in a more abstract way with befriended jurists, so to speak. With people

who are also in this profession. And know that kind of burden. And that's where talking is helpful”. (At01/80)

Child protection professionals view informal team debriefings as a vital resource for coping with work-related challenges (YWO02/114-118, YWO03/62, YWO04/102, YWO05/98-104, CC02/67, CC03/44, CC04/66, CC05/60, PCS03/40). It is explained, for example, that the team structures are designed to provide mutual support during stressful cases. Thus, such debriefings meet not only the child's needs, but also those of the primary case worker:

“Of course, we always ask, what does the child need? But I find it so important to say, And what do you need to be able to do this right now?” (YWO05/98)

Work conditions refers to respondents’ expressed perceptions that one’s job environment reduces the challenges associated with CSA casework. Some professionals in the criminal justice sector note that specialising in CSA is a personal choice (At03/98, Pr03/124, Pr04/72-74, Pr05/102, Po01/19). In the child protection sector group, one counselling centre worker stressed the benefits of having more flexible working hours, noting that they can “call it a day” after a difficult case (CC02/67). One PCS described the job as highly rewarding, emphasising that an increasing number of survivors of CSA are willing to proactively defend themselves in court. Others noted that the work enables them to advocate on behalf of survivors (PCS03/38, PCS04/24). One PCS found it “a relief” to work in various sectors instead of having to provide court support alone. (PCS05/76). Three individuals in the child protection group felt that weekly caseload reviews would be beneficial, as such reviews could allow the team to assess individual capacities and determine the team’s ability to handle each case (CC01/72, CC02/67, PCS04/24).

“So here, as part of our work, we have case assignments every week. In other words, we look at what requests there are and if there's a case where you say” No, I can't do that at the moment” or “It's too difficult.” Then it's kind of distributed, or we see who could take it on. That is a huge relief.” (CC01/72)

The subcategory *counselling* includes all references to employer-provided counselling services. Among the legal/judicial group, police officers noted that trained counselling officers are available to them upon request following a distressing on-duty situation (Po01/21, Po02/74, Po03/74-76, Po04/29-31). If required, the counselling officers can refer an individual to a therapist:

And then I also called these police officers through the state control centre for burdensome operations. They talk to the officers first and then describe the effects that this [handling distressing on-duty situations] can have and how they must take care of themselves (Po04/31).

In the child protection group, one individual from the YWO reported that their institution has a specialized CSA counsellor whom they can contact (YWO03/24).

All references to a participant's use of therapeutic services were assigned to the subcategory *psychotherapeutic intervention*. One law enforcement professional (Po01/21) noted that police officers have timely access to therapeutic services:

“In addition, the state police always have psychologists who are bound by confidentiality and to whom I can always turn, and we also have chaplains from the church to whom we can turn. I think this is very transparent and well explained. We can also turn to the medical services, or if I notice

changes in my behaviour or feel stress, we can also turn to the police doctors at any time. My personal impression is that they also offer us a very low-threshold opportunity to seek psychotherapeutic treatment outside of work (Po01/21).

None of the statements from the child protection group fell into the therapy category.

Suggestions for improvement of organisational resources include enhancing employer-provided compensation, strengthening supervision, and/or work conditions. In the criminal justice group, several respondents stressed the need for improved supervision measures (Pr01/138/144, Pr02/159, Po02/76, Po05/64). One police officer wished for the following improvements:

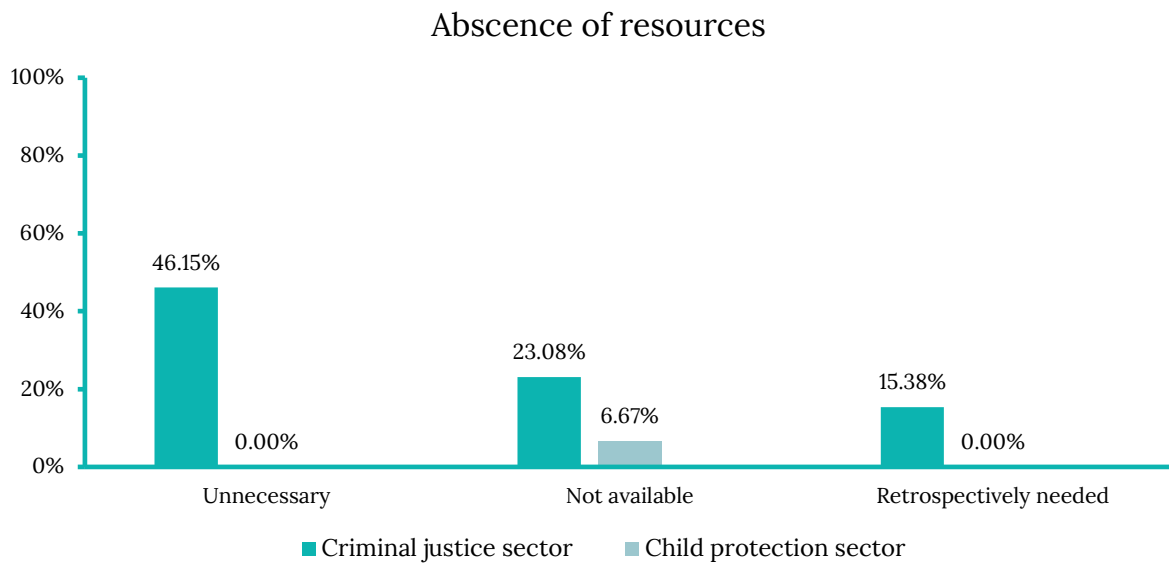
“I would also like to expand our areas of supervision. And we are working on that, especially in the area of child pornography. [...] We are still not good enough. [...] I could also imagine [...] that colleagues who work in this particularly tense area, including child pornography and CSA, could also receive special compensation.” (Po5/64)

In the child protection group, respondents described the need for supervision to be established (CC04/67) or enhanced (PCS01/81/86). They also noted that the work environment requires improvements such as increased financial resources (CC01/74), more staff (PCS05/78), and more flexible work schedules (CC02/69).

Figure 4 shows the number of respondents who commented on the subcategories not available, unnecessary and retrospectively needed.

Figure 3.

Perceived absence or inadequacy of resources reported by the interviewees.



Note. Due to the difference in sample size for the law/justice ($n = 13$) versus child protection ($n = 15$) groups, the calculations reflect the relative number for each group.

The subcategory *unnecessary* includes statements by respondents indicating that they do not need any resources to compensate for work-related psychological distress. In the legal/judicial group, supervision was not perceived as a potential resource (At01/76, Pr03/120, Pr05/98, Po03/76). One attorney reported that, due to their own resilience, they did not need work-provided resources (At03/92/98). Meanwhile, a police officer highlighted the departmental views:

“When I was head of the department, it was not entirely uncontroversial. Many department heads said, “Yeah, if they go to these supervision groups without any reason, they will miss out on work.” (Po04/31)

By contrast, none of the child protection respondents indicated that workplace resources were unnecessary.

The category *not available* encompasses references to the absence of established workplace-facilitated resources. In the

legal/judicial group, two respondents reported the previous existence of supervision groups. In both cases, the groups were dissolved (Pr02/153, Pr04/72-76). Meanwhile, one of the attorneys was unable to develop coping strategies as a self-employed professional (At01/78). In the child protection sector, a YWO respondent noted that none of the available resources was designed specifically for CSA (YWO02/118).

The subcategory *retrospectively needed* includes references to cases in which a respondent did not use available resources to compensate for work-related psychological distress but later deemed the resources necessary. One prosecutor reported repeatedly trying and failing to establish supervision groups (Pr01/138-140). A police officer noted that they did not accept offers of supervision while working on a CSA case involving graphic materials:

“There was also a discussion about whether we wanted to hire an external supervisor, so to speak, individually or in a group. We didn't even take that into consideration

afterwards. [...] I think in retrospect I would have wished that it had not been a choice, but that they had said that we need to do it now. A fixed date." (Po01/21)

By contrast, none of the child protection group respondents expressed a retrospective need for workplace resources.

Discussion

Professionals in both the criminal justice and child protection sectors frequently engage directly with children and adolescents affected by CSA – particularly in sensitive contexts like forensic interviews or counselling sessions. In these situations, emotional self-regulation is crucial: a calm and composed demeanour helps survivors feel safe and willing to talk, while visible signs of emotional distress can inhibit disclosure (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Priebe & Svedin, 2008).

These needs for emotional self-regulation align with national guidelines in Germany, which emphasise supervision, training, and supportive structures to promote child-friendly procedures and protect the professionals' well-being (BMFSFJ & UBSKM, 2021; BMFSFJ, 2024; §1(5) AGPsychPbGVO). Reflecting these priorities, our interviews offer insight into how professionals in Schleswig-Holstein manage the emotional demands of CSA cases. The following analysis addresses our first two research questions by exploring how these professionals perceive and utilize the resources available to them as well as by identifying key similarities and differences between the two sectors. We begin by presenting findings from the criminal justice group, followed by those from the child protection group.

Regarding *personal resources*, criminal justice professionals often cited their emotional resilience and ability to separate work and private life – a finding consistent

with that of Powell et al. (2014). Significantly, none of our respondents mentioned receiving social support outside of work, underscoring Seigfried-Spellar's (2018) conclusion that law enforcement professionals rarely seek social support. Despite that conclusion, studies highlight the importance of social support, for both for work and private life (2020; Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014). Only one respondent reported hobbies as a resource, even though previous studies showed hobbies to be a common coping tool (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014). Respondents in our interviews did not indicate increased substance abuse, in contrast to the findings of Powell et al. (2014) and Siegfried-Spellar (2018), though underreporting cannot be ruled out due to social desirability bias.

Respondents in the child protection group positioned themselves similarly. Their most frequently mentioned coping resource – emotional resilience – has not yet been explicitly identified in studies, although vicarious resilience was reported by Silveria and Boyer (2015). Setting personal boundaries was the second most frequently mentioned resource in our sample, in line with the findings of Beer et al. (2021) and Hunter and Schofield (2006). Our respondents also frequently mentioned using hobbies as coping mechanisms; this resource is also noted elsewhere (Beer et al., 2021; Hunter & Schofield, 2006). However, the two sectors we included showed a clear difference regarding the use of social support in their private life: Unlike those in the criminal justice group, some respondents in the child protection group reported using social support as a resource.

Scholars often cite social support is repeatedly as a positive coping mechanism (Anderson, 2000; Beer et al., 2021; Hunter & Schofield, 2006). At the same time, coping strategies like substance abuse (Beer et al., 2021), problem avoidance, and self-criticism (Anderson, 2000), while not mentioned by the child protection workers we interviewed,

cannot be ruled out for various reasons. For example, respondents may be reluctant to report these behaviours due to social desirability bias.

Professional resources were cited least often, with criminal justice respondents sporadically mentioning counselling or training, despite studies emphasizing their importance (Powell et al., 2014; Seigfried-Spellar, 2018). Child protection workers mentioned counselling and training more often, though details on the training content remain vague. Research suggests that effective training could address problem-solving skills (Anderson, 2000), knowledge enhancement, and the employment of coping strategies during sessions (Hunter & Schofield, 2006).

Overall, *organisational resources* were the most frequently cited and showed the greatest variation across both sectors we studied. In the criminal justice sector, the primary resources mentioned were supervision and informal team debriefing, followed by working conditions and counselling.

This finding is broadly consistent with previous studies (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014). Formal team debriefing – such as those conducted with a department head (Fansher et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014) – were not mentioned, although their use cannot be ruled out. By contrast, almost all the child protection professionals we interviewed acknowledged regular supervision and informal team debriefings with colleagues as key organizational resources. These professionals highlighted the benefits of formal team debriefings such as regular team meetings. Some respondents from the child protection sector also discussed working conditions, such as effective or poor case-management. Team debriefings and discussing working conditions are in line with previous studies, which have also identified these organisational resources as beneficial for

professionals working in child protection (Beckmann et al., 2018; Beer et al., 2021; Choi, 2011; Hunter & Schofield, 2006; Fuseini, 2024; Kломann et al., 2019).

Within the criminal justice sector, respondents reported a lack of employer-provided resources, and sometimes perceived them as unnecessary. Several factors may contribute to this perception. First, professional culture and departmental expectations may prioritise operational duties over self-care, leading staff to view supervision and counselling as optional, in some cases, disruptive. For instance, one police officer reported that department heads considered supervision without any reason as potentially interfering with work. Second, some of the professionals we interviewed rely on personal resilience and coping strategies, they believe they can manage work-related stress independently.

These findings indicate that the guidelines set by the BMFSFJ and UBSKM (2021) are not being followed. However, two participants retrospectively felt that the resources offered by their workplace should have been obligatory, as they were struggling to cope after several years. Some studies have also reported individuals' underutilization of available resources (Powell et al., 2014; Seigfried-Spellar, 2018).

Our interviews revealed that those in the criminal justice sector feel that they do not need additional resources, contrary to previous studies attributing resource underutilization in this group to an assumed stigma. However, one police officer mentioned that the topic remained somewhat controversial. In comparison, only two individuals from the child protection group indicated a lack of CSA-specific resources in the workplace, even though general resources were offered. This contrasts with the findings of Beer et al. (2021), who address the lack of resources at both the individual and organizational levels, as well as the challenge of maintaining existing resources.

Hunter and Schofield (2006) note that organisational support is sometimes absent and that individuals may face stigma for managing cases ineffectively. Considering the importance of having a supportive work environment that is responsive to employee needs, it is proposed that leaders should proactively offer individual support (Hunter & Schofield, 2006). This proposal aligns with our findings and underlines the importance of moving beyond resource provision toward strengthening organisational cultures of support. Similarly, our results indicate that child protection professionals in Germany have well-established resources, with diverse *organisational resources* integrated into their daily work routines.

Finally, concerning our third research question, which addresses respondents' suggestions and desires regarding enhancements to the resources at their disposal, our findings were as follows. Criminal justice professionals mainly sought better supervision, with one proposing special pay and leave for stressful CSA work. Previous research has explored compulsory participation in mental health services, such as counselling sessions, as a means of counteracting workers' stigmatisation or lack of awareness about available resources (Seigfried-Spellar, 2018).

While compulsory measures can ensure that all staff engage with support, they also raise ethical and practical concerns, including potential resistance from employees and the need to balance personal autonomy with an organizations' responsibility for employees' well-being. In our study, stigma was mentioned only once, suggesting that compulsory measures may not be perceived as necessary in this context. Child protection professionals, by contrast to the criminal justice group, requested more ongoing training, inclusion of CSA topics at the university level, improved or established supervision, and enhanced financial and flexible working conditions. Unlike prior

research indicating a lack of workplace support and stigma (Hunter & Schofield, 2006), our findings suggest that child protection professionals in Germany generally have well-established resources integrated into their daily routines, and that stigmatisation is not a significant barrier they face.

Limitations

The interviews were conducted in German, and their translation into English may have resulted in the loss of some information. Despite this limitation, we decided to publish the study in English, as the data provides important insights for the international community. There were also some methodological limitations. Due to the nature of qualitative data, the results are not generalizable. Furthermore, the questions about one's own resources were embedded in a larger, structural guideline. Moreover, the questions regarding resources were open-ended, it is therefore possible that respondents used resources that they forgot to mention. However, the semi-structured design of the interviews allowed the respondents to identify helpful resources without being influenced by the interviewer's preconceptions. In addition, we did not ask participants about their psychological and emotional well-being as part of the design of this study.

Conclusion

Our interviews in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, indicated that the use of workplace-provided resources is mandatory in some professions. In professions where resources are not mandatory, they are nonetheless provided to employees in most cases. This stands in contrast to findings from international studies, which emphasize the importance of workplace culture through greater organizational support (Choi, 2011; Hunter & Schofield, 2006). Thus, our findings

have practical implications for organizational support structures in the field of CSA. They suggest that resources within the German child protection sector are well established and provide a framework that could benefit the German criminal justice sector. By adopting proven models, fostering collaboration with child protection professionals, and identifying transferable practices, the criminal justice sector could strengthen its capacities while uncovering existing but previously unrecognised resources. In addition, the leveraging of existing interagency working groups for CSA cases may offer a cost-effective strategy for implementing cross-sector support measures.

Such groups already involve collaboration among professionals from multiple institutions, including child protection services (e.g., youth welfare offices and counselling centres) and the criminal justice system (e.g., police, prosecutors, and attorneys). This setup facilitates information sharing and coordinated decision-making as noted by Krüger and Niehaus (2019). It also provides a ready-made structure through which psychosocial support resources can be made accessible, thereby the financial challenge associated with implementing such resources, which was identified by Seigfried-Spellar (2018).

In international contexts, where more pronounced deficits have been identified by previous research (Anderson, 2000; Choi, 2011; Fansher et al., 2020), our findings provide a starting point for the development of organizational support structures that promote the occupational health of professionals working with CSA cases. Future research could explore the potential for interagency collaboration on organisational resources, especially in settings where financial constraints and the stigma around seeking help, as noted in previous studies, hinder the establishment of mandatory support systems. It is particularly important,

that professionals working directly with CSA survivors are aware of and reflect their resources, especially in potentially stressful settings like child protection assessments, forensic interviews and consultations. This includes seeking and receiving feedback from colleagues in other professions about case management and interactions with survivors. For instance, an external credibility assessor advised one of our interviewees to reflect on and improve their forensic interview techniques so they can avoid repeat mistakes that might otherwise be addressed only during court proceedings.

This study cannot determine whether the resources available to professionals in Schleswig-Holstein contribute to well-being, especially in cases of CSA. Rather, it offers comparative insights into what individuals working in two sectors – criminal justice and child protection – perceive as helpful to them. Although it is unclear how the resources described in this study directly contribute to the well-being of a broader sample in Germany, the use of certain resources in the international quantitative studies by Anderson (2000), Choi (2011), and Fansher et al. (2020) suggests that resources could positively impact well-being. Considering the limited research on this topic in Germany, the aim of this study was to explore established resources. Further research on a larger scale – for example, using a questionnaire – is needed to assess the real benefits of resources for the mental well-being of professionals in Germany.

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