



Understanding Youth Justice Professionals' Motivations For Their Work

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Abstract

Youth Justice (YJ) professionals experience work-related stress, challenges and trauma in their work (Sibisi & Warria, 2020) yet they continue to enter the field. Research regarding motivations of YJ professionals for their work is limited, but necessary to improve overall quality of care and to ensure the most suitable candidates are hired. Semi-structured interviews aimed to explore YJ workers' motivations for their work and how they experience and cope with challenges on the job. Thematic analyses indicates that YJ professionals are motivated by the opportunity to contribute to the lives of youth through prevention and intervention, progress and learning, and advocacy and resource provision. Challenges in YJ work are often related to feeling unsupported owing to low salaries, staff shortages, and system constraints. Motivating factors which contribute to their ability to stay in the field despite the challenges include a passion for their work and seeing change in their clients. Healthy coping strategies appear necessary to manage challenges and may contribute to the longevity in the field. Findings provide insight into YJ professionals' motivations, coping, and reasons for remaining in the field. These results can help to inform hiring, training and policy in Ontario YJ work.

Keywords: youth-justice, work, motivation

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Introduction

The prevailing discourse in research suggests that YJ professionals experience work-related stress and trauma due to the challenges they face in their daily work (Dum & Fader, 2013; Lakind et al., 2014; Sibisi & Warria, 2020; Tärnfalk & Alm, 2019), yet people continue to enter the field. Previous literature highlights the rewarding nature of the YJ field as it offers the potential to make significant changes in the lives of youth (Lakind et al., 2014; Losung et al., 2021; Sibisi & Warria, 2020). However, there is limited literature currently that explores the motivation behind YJ workers' choice to enter the field. This study aimed to explore what leads people to the field and what contributes to them staying in it, even with the challenges faced. Below, we review the limited literature that exists concerning the motivations of youth and adult criminal justice professionals for their work and the challenges they experience.

Youth and Adult Criminal Justice Professionals' Motivations for Their Work

Criminal justice professionals have jobs that are multi-faceted; they are expected to fulfil many duties (e.g., clinical evaluation, treatment planning, case management, counselling) and they work in various settings (e.g., community agencies, custody, and the courts). The literature regarding YJ professionals' motivations for their work is limited and more research in this area would be beneficial as working with youth offers an important opportunity for early intervention. It is necessary to understand the motivations of professionals for the work in this field as it may provide insight into what workers are seeking and how managers can create opportunities for staff to find fulfillment and be more likely stay.

Common factors that contributed to both youth and adult criminal justice professionals' decisions to work in their field were a desire to help others (Lakind et al., 2014) and public safety (Sibisi & Warria, 2020). Helping others and making a meaningful contribution in their lives often meant instilling positive change in clients and witnessing their personal growth (Lakind et al., 2014; Sibisi & Warria, 2020). For mentors of at-risk youth, Lakind et al. (2014) found that a motivating factor was the opportunity to help youth by acting as role models. Similarly, Farrow (2004) found that youth and adult probation officers expressed feeling satisfied when offenders experienced positive outcomes such as making change that would reduce their likelihood to re-offend. Furthermore, establishing working relationships with offenders and making a positive impact in their lives assisted probation officers to remain in their field (Farrow, 2004).

Additionally, protecting society is a motivating factor in youth and adult probation officers' choice of work that often consists of crime prevention and early intervention to reduce harm within communities (Sibisi & Warria, 2020). Probation officers can work at the prevention level targeting youth and their families to diminish the chances of recidivism by offering programs such as parenting skills or child development programs within communities, to ultimately offer protection to society (Sibisi & Warria, 2020). Although the opportunity to offer protection to the public is one of the many rewarding elements of youth and adult criminal justice work, there are many challenges within this field of work that may attribute to the high turnover rate.

Challenges Faced by Professionals Working in the Criminal Justice System

Common challenges that adult and YJ professionals face include time and resource limitations, demoralization, and challenging client behaviours (Franich et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2020). Resource limitations often include lack of staff, lack of training, and lack of time with clients which can impact the quality of care that is provided (Franich et al., 2020). Franich et al. (2020) investigated the experiences of service providers for incarcerated women. The participants discussed how the compartmentalized nature of the criminal justice service sector could be a challenge for service providers and a disadvantage to clients since it reduced the amount of time service workers had with clients (Franich et al., 2020). Furthermore, employees were often overworked with more cases than they were able to sufficiently address as a result of the limited staff. Hence, time and resource limitations can be a contributing factor to the demoralization of criminal justice professionals eventually leading to burn-out.

Demoralization is commonly experienced by adult and youth criminal justice professionals owing to the abundant amount of desk-work, minimal pay, and the emotionally-charged nature of their work (Dum & Fader, 2013; Lakind et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2020). In Dum and Fader's (2013) study, adult aftercare workers expressed that they felt fatigued and discouraged by the insufficient pay and amount of work at their desks. Similarly, Powell et al. (2020) explored the experiences of 24 prison-based staff working in mother-child separation who expressed suffering from severe emotional impacts due to their need to "stifle" or "manage" their own emotions while watching someone else break down at work (Powell et al., 2020). While, at-risk youth mentors described feeling overwhelmed by their responsibility to be available at all times for the children with whom they were working which led to demoralization (Lakind et al., 2014). Assisting individuals with challenging behaviours is another aspect of criminal justice work that can take an emotional toll on the workers.

Challenging client behaviours including verbal, sexual and physical harassment and abuse can lead to exhaustion and burn-out amongst YJ professionals (Sibisi & Warria, 2020). The diagnosis of Conduct Disorder (CD), a mental illness defined by aggressive behaviours that violate the rights of others and go against social norms is common amongst youths in the Juvenile Justice System (Frick, 2015). Struggles that YJ professionals face when providing services to violent youth include client reluctance, difficulty in finding effective treatment, and safety-risk to staff and the community (Willoughby & Perry, 2022). In addition, youth probation officers found their work environments psychologically and emotionally difficult because of the frequency and intensity of challenging behaviours amongst clients (i.e., being robbed at work or having to deal with abuse, sexual harassment, and assault, while not being provided with services to help them debrief (Sibisi & Warria, 2020).

Currently, the literature is primarily centred on professionals working in adult correctional facilities but it would be beneficial to have more research available highlighting the perspectives of professionals who have worked specifically with justice-involved youth. This study explores three core research questions. First, what motivates professionals to enter into work with youth involved in the criminal justice system? Second, why do YJ professionals remain in their field of work? Third, what are the challenges faced by YJ professionals and how

do they cope with these challenges? In addressing these questions, the study contributes to research regarding the experiences of YJ professionals and their underlying motivations to enter and stay in their field of work, despite the challenges.

Method

To participate in this study, current or previous experience working in YJ was required. A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit individuals via emails sent to managers of YJ programs across Ontario. Interviews were conducted online in a semi-structured, open-ended fashion. Participants were asked for demographic information first, then they were asked a series of open-ended questions around their thoughts regarding their work and what led them to the field. All correspondence regarding this study clearly outlined the fact that participants needed to have past or present YJ experience. It was also made clear that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and could be terminated without cause at any time. A formal consent protocol was provided to each participant outlining the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits to the participant, and the limits of confidentiality. Each respondent was informed that their workplace would not know that they took part, and they would not be identified in the data. Participants were also made aware that they could refuse to answer any question if it made them uncomfortable. This study was given approval by the Research Ethics board of Trent University (28211).

Participants and Analysis

The study included 12 participants who were primarily female ($n = 10$), between the ages of 24 and 66 ($M = 34.67$, $SD = 15.23$), and had experience in the YJ field. They had various roles and levels of experience (4 months to 40 years). All participants were currently working with youth in a community-based setting.

This study focused on the experiences and thoughts of YJ professionals; therefore, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method that is often used for research regarding the experiences, thoughts, or behaviours of individuals of a particular population (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis involves the identification of common themes, constructed patterns or meanings obtained from a data set to answer research questions. Before using thematic analysis, the recorded interviews were transcribed. Then, the data analysis process began with familiarization of the data. Afterwards, codes began to emerge from the data and the generalization of initial codes took place. Next common themes were identified and then reviewed, followed by defining and naming them. Data was analyzed by a second coder and a third coder was available to resolve any disagreements. An inductive approach was used, meaning that the discovered themes were based on the data and not on pre-existing theories or frameworks (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Therefore, the themes depended on the information provided by the participants rather than the researchers' prior interests or beliefs regarding the research questions (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Results

Owing to the qualitative nature of this study, thorough answers to the questions concerning YJ professionals' motivations to enter into work with justice-involved youth and remain in their field despite the challenges are found within the data. Overall, the results have highlighted over-arching themes including the common desire of participants to make an impact on the lives of youth, the lack of support they receive in their field, and the effective coping strategies that they incorporate daily to combat the challenges.

Desire to Make an Impact on the Lives of Youth

The desire to make a positive contribution in the lives of youth is an over-arching theme that was emphasized across all participants (n = 12). Many described making an impact on youth as a meaningful aspect of their work (n = 6) and some described this desire as being a reason that they entered the field to begin with (n = 7). Participants shared several personal anecdotes and meaningful experiences where they were able to see how they contributed to the lives of their clients, whether that be a client telling them years later, or witnessing significant client progress first-hand. One participant was surprised to hear of the impact she had on youth and the moments that they found significant when she only viewed these moments as being simple acts of kindness; for example, asking a youth if they needed anything (P9). These experiences indicate that even the smallest of gestures can create a meaningful impact for justice-involved youth. Other participants mentioned the individual moments that reminded them of the impact they have had. For example, a non-verbal client trying to sound out their name at home (P1). Overall, participants noted that having an impact on young peoples' lives was part of their inspiration to enter the field (P 4, 5, 7, 8, 12) and many reflected that it remains a meaningful part of their work (P5, 7, 8, 9, 10). Participants have demonstrated their desire and capacity to help youth in areas including prevention and intervention (n = 6), progress and learning (n = 10), and advocacy and resource provision (n = 4).

Prevention and Intervention

YJ workers within the sample discussed their ability to help youth through means of prevention and intervention. Several participants shared that their belief in youth's capacity for change contributed to their personal philosophy, which they believed was necessary to effectively implement prevention and intervention programs (P3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10). As stated by participant 3, "People can change and if they're young, there's more opportunity to support them in making those changes and heading in the right direction." (P3). Working with youth provides the opportunity for early intervention before negative habits and behaviours increase during the transition into adulthood (P4). Others mentioned that this opportunity for prevention is one factor that led them into the youth-justice field in the first place (P6, 8). A positive aspect of working

with justice-involved youth in comparison to adults is the greater potential to make changes and intervene early to prevent future justice-involvement; this is owing to the learning that takes place with youth allowing them to make progress.

Progress and Learning

Some participants were motivated to enter the field to help youth learn, make lifestyle changes, and ultimately progress. The small wins with youth were described as a job highlight by many participants (P1, 2, 4, 7, 10, 11). Some of these small wins include being able to connect with youth (P1, 2), seeing youth complete probation (P4), take leadership in their own lives by seeking out additional resources (P10), complete all of their high school credits and graduate (P11), or take a small step forward in an area they previously struggled with. For example, a youth learning self-regulation skills who previously struggled with managing their emotions in social situations (P2, P7).

The opportunity to have conversations with kids that are more than just the school curriculum... Those are the most meaningful ones where they actually learn something about themselves or learn something about how to [be] human, or how society works, or how social interactions work or if you specifically are teaching those social skills, and they finally get it, and they finally can be in a better situation than they were before. The aha moments (P2).

Therefore, helping youth to learn in areas outside of traditional education which might be more applicable to their day to day lives in addition to the school curriculum is a rewarding element of YJ work as mentioned by participant 2 above. Participants also mentioned “aha moments” or “lightbulb moments” when discussing meaningful aspects of their work (P1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12) indicating that YJ professionals find teaching to be a rewarding aspect of their profession. Participants discussed the importance of allowing youth to take the lead in their learning. For example, tailoring work to connect with the youth’s interests to help them learn more effectively (P1) or allowing youth to set their own agenda and offering support as needed to facilitate learning (P2, 9). Other participants mentioned how rewarding it is to see the youth implementing what they have learned and making notable progress (P3, 4, 11).

I mean there's no better feeling than seeing somebody, you know, like in study... didn't really feel like they had a lot going for them to graduating high school early and going to college, for example (P11).

Therefore, YJ professionals appear to value the opportunity to help youth recalibrate and choose a more productive path for themselves such as pursuing post-secondary education. These positive experiences serve as motivators for YJ professionals to pursue this work. Providing advocacy and resources helps to facilitate learning and progress for youth.

Advocacy and Providing Resources

Youth involved in the justice system often need resources and to be advocated for; there are professionals who find it especially rewarding to help in these areas. In fact, participants specifically mentioned advocacy and the opportunity to provide youth with resources as motivations to pursue YJ work (P3, 8, 9, 10). Advocating on the behalf of justice-involved youth is especially helpful during court cases and meetings with frontline individuals such as police or probation officers to ensure that workers within the justice system are up-to-date, informed, and held accountable concerning youth's rights. Justice-involved youth are also often under-resourced, therefore, participants described providing education regarding heritage, sexual orientation, gender identity, drugs, alcohol, and life-skills within YJ agencies as beneficial for their growth and progression.

I would say, getting youth here set-up with the Indigenous cultural support workers or getting them set up back into school (is a highlight)... So for Indigenous youth, we get them set up with the Indigenous workers; they do some smudge kits, they learn about their culture and background, they get them food, and sometimes they do some events outside of the agency. Also, it's the same idea with the 2SLgbtq+ community, we get youth essentially set up with some resources if they want to participate in that to assist them in their transition. Yeah, I think that's the coolest thing... to support any walk of life that comes through our doors the best we can (P8).

Participant 8 expanded on this idea by mentioning the importance of advocacy and educating the frontline individuals who are often first to encounter justice-involved youth such as police officers (P8). Advocacy ensures that front-line workers such as police officers are educated and able to establish early intervention with justice-involved youth rather than simply giving warnings to youth that do not offer accountability and often lead to minimal lifestyle and behavioural changes. These sentiments are supported not only by frontline staff but were echoed by those in leadership positions (P3, 9). Furthermore, advocating for justice-involved youth and providing them with resources can be a motivating factor in their pursuit of YJ work and also contributes to their ability to be an influential and caring adult in their clients' lives.

Being an Influential and Caring Adult

Personal characteristics possessed by YJ professionals such as care and compassion can contribute to why they were drawn to YJ work. Many YJ professionals from this study believed that the youth they had worked with lacked caring adults in their lives. Some even entered the field to fulfill that role for youth (P1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8) and remain in the field because they care deeply about the youth and exhibit compassionate qualities. As stated by participant 3, “I think recognizing that they're here, not always, because of something they did, I mean they can't change their family. So, having empathy, I think is important.” (P3). Additionally, participants discussed the relationship building aspect of the work in connection with offering care and support (P1, 2, 8, 12). This sentiment is supported by participant 2 who spoke about the caring personalities of her colleagues who would go out of their way to make other staff feel comfortable, “They were so caring, like they would go to the ends of the earth to make you feel comfortable and welcome.” (P2). As mentioned above, being able to offer support and care for the youth while also receiving it from the staff is a positive aspect of YJ work (P1, 2, 8, 12). Participant 8 echoed this sentiment by describing his co-workers as caring individuals who offer a supportive environment to the youth who attend the agency (P8).

Probably 80% of the youth just...you know, they don't have an adult or... a positive influence in their life. So, they love coming here and we just like chat with them and see how their day's going, and we're just caring individuals that support them... (P8).

Therefore, caring and compassionate characteristics are demonstrated by the participants which may have contributed to their gravitation towards the youth-justice field. Perhaps, this is connected to their own experiences of care and compassion, or the lack of it, in their own life.

Past Personal Experiences

Past personal experiences, such as mental health struggles, addictions or witnessing friends struggle with depression and risky behaviour were mentioned as reasons for entering the YJ field (P5, 7, 11, 12).

Yeah, I would say, because I have my own lived experience where people believed in me and I recognized, you know... what I needed to do to make that change. I had people that supported me through that and allowed me to make the change on my own terms without forcing me. For me, that was a really liberating experience (P7).

As stated above, personal experiences of receiving support from caring individuals in the past can serve as inspiration to pass on the kindness to youth who may be experiencing similar struggles. Consequently, personal experiences can be a motivational factor contributing to YJ professionals' choice of work. YJ work provides the opportunity to help youth through prevention and intervention, progress and learning, along with advocacy and resource provision. The opportunity to truly help youth motivates professionals to enter the YJ field as it creates fulfillment and a sense of reward for them. Participants often mentioned how they have been able to witness growth in the youth they have worked with and how their help has been utilized. This also serves as a motivator for professionals to remain in the field.

Work-Related Challenges Contributing to Thoughts of Changing Fields

The YJ professionals in this study have experienced several challenges in their daily work which have contributed to thoughts of changing fields entirely. To begin, participants reported challenges such as having to manage difficult behaviours with the youth (n = 2), client suicide (P2), traumatic stories (n = 3), frequent learning curves (n = 3), and a sense of powerlessness (n = 3). However, these challenges by themselves are not the reasons that participants considered changing fields. Notably, the majority of the participants who claimed that they have considered changing careers (n = 7) attribute these thoughts to low salary (n = 3) and burn-out (n = 5). They claim that it is the lack of support from the government and agencies that contributes to overall burn-out.

Lack of Support

Participants reported that they receive minimal support from the government with regard to funding which contributes to low salaries (n = 3, P3, 7, 8) and a staff shortage (n = 4, P7, 8, 10, 12) adding to burn-out. Participants also reported a lack of support systemically (n = 3, P5, 10, 11) which can cause barriers to the youth's progress (n = 2, P8, 10).

Low Salary

Participants raised some of the personal challenges they face owing to the low salary they earn in their field. Some mentioned that they have considered transitioning to another career (n = 3, P3, 7, 8), and one noted that he needed to pick up additional part-time work to manage his finances (P7). The need for multiple income streams and jobs to live comfortably can also contribute to a lack of work-life balance, leading to burn-out. Participant 7 mentioned how a lack of financial stability can also contribute to discontent in life which can impact quality of work.

Money doesn't equal happiness but if it can allow me to do the things that make me feel like a complete human being...Well, if I don't have that, then that's gonna not pan out well for me. Also, it wouldn't contribute well to the work that you're doing if you're upset all the time and not happy in your life outside of that place, so that can be a challenge (P7).

Other participants mentioned that the pay in YJ work continues to remain the same while the costs of living in Ontario are increasing significantly (n = 2, P3, P7). Therefore, insufficient pay for YJ professionals is a challenge within the field that can negatively impact quality of work and may also contribute to the high turnover rate.

System Constraints

Along with salaries, participants discussed frustrations and challenges associated with system constraints such as lack of resources and funding, and Covid-19 protocols that affect the productivity of their work (n = 3, P5, 10, 12). System constraints contribute to a sense of powerlessness amongst YJ professionals in this sample due to their inability to have control over the outcome of certain situations such as sexual assault court cases for example, as described by one participant (P5). Another systemic issue that was mentioned was the lack of psychological resources available for youth who are struggling with mental health after taking steps to seek help. This is a concern as participants have stated that it is common for the youth they work with to have mental illnesses (n = 12). As one participant mentioned, it often takes at least six months for a youth to receive services after placing a request or demonstrating a need for it due to the extended wait-time currently in Ontario for psychological services. "Seeing youth that are struggling that are sitting on waitlists for 6 months, right? Seeing youth that are struggling that can't get a face-to-face meeting." (P10). Participant 10 expanded on this by mentioning how Covid-19 exacerbated this issue and created even more of a backlog for receiving psychological services. Participants expressed feeling especially un-supported throughout the Covid-19 pandemic as the regulations were often non-conducive to creating a positive learning environment for youth which affected their progress. Therefore, system constraints often cause YJ professionals to feel unsupported which can have an impact on the effectiveness and productivity of their work, ultimately, affecting the youth's progress.

Heavy Workload for Minimal Staff

Another challenge that youth-justice workers reported was having to take on a heavier workload due to inadequate staffing (n = 4, P7, 8, 10, 12). Specifically, one executive director mentioned having to close the agency if one of her staff members became ill as they simply did not have enough workers (P8). Another participant described being trained on the job as a result of the limited staff and expressed how she felt it would've been beneficial to have two of herself

to fulfill all of her obligations to the best of her ability. Obligations and responsibilities can become overwhelming for youth-justice professionals when they have to accept extra duties and tasks as a result of this staffing shortage (P10, 12).

Sometimes it does feel overwhelming. We're a little short staffed right now, so I'm also running our after school program which right now is kind of the added stressor because I'm trying to figure out where today I'm going to get groceries for the program, because tomorrow I have court, a staff team meeting, and then I have to go right to the after school program. So I'm like, 'Okay, where am I going to fit all of these things?' (P12)

Evidently, limited staff leads to a more dense work-load for the staff present which can contribute to them feeling overwhelmed and unsure as to how they will complete all of the tasks set before them. Furthermore, it is crucial to address the lack of support that YJ professionals are experiencing (low salaries, system constraints, and staff shortages) in order to attract and retain incoming employees.

Work-Related Benefits Contributing to Staying in the Field

Despite the challenges participants are faced with, multiple of them explained that they chose to stay in the field because they felt a sense of belonging and passion for their work and that their profession was in alignment with their calling (n = 3, P7, 10, 11). Being able to witness the changes and successes in the lives of the youth they worked with was another reason participants chose to stay in the YJ field (n = 3, P4, 7, 9).

Feelings of Belonging and Passion for the Work

Participants expressed feeling a passion for their work and a sense of belonging in their field which motivated them to stay despite the challenges they experience (n = 3, P7, 10, 11). "I really enjoy this work, it feels like where I belong. So I should continue to nurture this and gain more skills and more education and with that comes the opportunity to make better money." (P7). Participants also described their passion for working with youth as a motivating factor for remaining in the field (P10, 11).

I think that my heart is here. My heart is in YJ and the grass isn't always greener on the other side, right? Unless you found a job that was completely not stressful in any way which I don't think exists, you know, like there's stress everywhere. I think my heart is here. It's with youth and I don't think that I would feel any better anywhere else (P11).

As expressed above by participant 11, each job comes with its own challenges, however, passion for the work can outweigh the stressors and motivate one to continue pursuing it. Witnessing the positive change and successes in the lives of youth contributes to the passion and fulfillment that participants experience in their field which is another motivator.

Making a Positive Change and Success Stories

Another factor that motivates participants to stay in the youth-justice field is similar to what brought them there to begin with; seeing the positive change that they make in the lives of youth and witnessing the youth's successes (n = 3, P4, 7, 9). Participants discussed how they have the opportunity to support youth during some of the lowest points of their lives while also getting to witness their growth and positive outcomes afterwards. One participant mentioned the variety of stories she was able to see unfold throughout her career, "I've seen some really sad stories over the years and I've seen some really great, happy outcomes over the years, too. So it's been enough to sustain me and want to continue to do better and more." (P9). Another participant mentioned the fulfillment he receives from being able to change youth's perspectives in a way that helps them (P7).

I think what motivates me is the fact that I am able to make a change, or a positive impact on people's lives. I am able to really help change people's perspectives and help move people along from potentially some of the worst parts of their lives. So that to me is like really inspiring (P7).

Furthermore, participants who remain in the field despite having considered changing careers do so as a result of their own passion for the work and the fulfillment they gain from seeing their clients succeed. However, YJ professionals also have to use personal coping strategies in order to remain in the field as they are not supported in dealing with the daily challenges.

Coping Strategies to Manage Work Challenges

Coping strategies are defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are viewed as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual (Kavanagh, 1986). When discussing work challenges and coping, participants mentioned coping strategies that helped them to manage (i.e., mindfulness, hobbies and interests, boundary-setting, cognitive re-structuring and social support).

Participants described how they incorporate mindfulness in their daily lives in a variety of ways. One participant spoke about the importance of journaling (P5), another explained how mindfulness techniques such as taking breaks to check in with her thoughts, close her eyes, and take deep breaths helped her to cope with work-stress over the years (P6). Additionally, participants discussed the importance of hobbies and interests for mental health and work-life

balance. Some of these hobbies include playing with dogs, reading, cricket, sewing, and music (P7, 10, 11, 12). Overall, when discussing hobbies and interests, participants often emphasized that they are important as they create opportunities to have fun and channel their energy towards an activity outside of work (P7, 10, 11, 12).

Along with making time for themselves, participants discussed setting boundaries as an important coping strategy for stress which may be a contributing factor to longevity within the field. Boundaries can include mental and time boundaries such as limiting emails to work hours and taking time for gratitude, pets and/or family life (P1, 7, 9, 10). Participants emphasized that they were able to prioritize boundary-setting and self-care to "not take work home" with them as it would not be productive or helpful to the youth (P7, 9).

Cognitive restructuring, a psychotherapeutic process that is used to assist people in changing their perceptions and the way that they think going forward (Crum, 2021), was also a strategy used to protect participants' balance (P1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11). Many participants mentioned the importance of reminding themselves that they can only support the youth to the best of their ability but they do not have full control over their outcomes (P1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11). Focusing on the factors that one can control rather than the variables that are out of one's control tends to be an effective use of cognitive restructuring to cope with stress for this sample.

Finally, participants noted the role of social support for coping with work challenges (n = 11, P1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). Participants described social support in the context of having supportive co-workers and executive directors, but some also described the importance of having a supportive social network outside of work. Participants discussed the value of social support being offered in various contexts such as having colleagues offer to help with a case, relieve some of the workload, brainstorm ideas and strategies, debrief, offer emotional support or go on breaks together (n = 11, P1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). Seeking guidance from more experienced co-workers or those in leadership positions was another common theme amongst participants who mentioned the benefit of social support (n = 5, P1, 4, 6, 7, 9). Participants also mentioned the significance of having a supportive network of friends outside of work, especially for consolation during times of grief or work-related loss (n = 2, P2, 3). It is possible that making use of effective coping strategies is related to the ability or desire to remain in the field even with its challenges.

Discussion

Within this sample, YJ professionals were motivated by their desire to help youth which is consistent with previous literature (Lakind et al, 2014). Nine of the participants felt empowered to help youth in various ways through prevention and intervention, progress and learning, along with advocacy and resource provision. Most commonly, professionals in this study were motivated to help youth in their learning and progress as similar to mentors who desired to teach through modelling in a study by Lakind et al (2014) and probation officers in another study who seemed to correct clients' criminal behaviours (Sibisi & Warriar, 2020). This motivation to teach youth and see them progress was more commonly noted amongst front-line workers compared to those in leadership positions. This could be due to the direct, one-to-one, interactive nature of their job where they are given the opportunity to witness the youth's growth first-hand. Whereas YJ professionals in leadership positions such as executive directors or directors of community-based

programs do not have the same extent of daily interaction with the youth. However, it is important to note that there is a lack of pre-existing research focusing on leaders in the YJ field to support this claim. In addition, motivators amongst front-line workers seemed to differ from YJ leaders in this study. YJ professionals in leadership positions mentioned being motivated to help youth indirectly by either offering high-quality programming through out-sourcing program development to highly qualified individuals or collaborating with the community to fight for necessary systemic changes which advocate for the youth's best interest. In sum, those working front-line appeared to be motivated to help youth directly by enhancing their learning and progress while those in leadership positions were motivated to help youth by making changes regarding structure and programming. Research by Lakind et al (2014) and Sibisi & Warri (2020) similarly found that front-line workers report being motivated to help youth make change and act as a positive role model. The results of this study suggest that there may be differences in the motivations of those working front-line versus those in leadership positions, further exploration of these differences is warranted.

Although it is meaningful and rewarding to help justice-involved youth, half of the sample acknowledged that they have considered changing careers at some point along their journey. The primary causes for their contemplation of leaving included low salaries and burn-out. Participants' reports of low salary aligned with Dum and Fader's (2013) previous research which found that aftercare workers often experienced demoralization due to their overwhelming amount of work and insufficient pay. Those who reported feeling stressed and burned-out also reported a lack of support in the form of system constraints and a heavy workload for minimal staff which may have contributed to this reported stress and burn-out. This finding supports the work of Franich et al (2020) who established that a lack of resources and staff was also a concern for service providers of incarcerated women. Staff reported having insufficient time to give adequate attention to each of their clients, which impacted the quality of care that they were able to provide (Franich et al., 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to address the low salaries and shortages of staff in YJ work as these appear to be contributing factors to the burn-out that YJ professionals experience, ultimately impacting their quality of work and potentially causing them to consider leaving the field.

Results from this study have indicated that effective coping strategies may also be important for remaining in the field. Social support was found to be the most common coping strategy amongst participants and can also be related to boundary-setting. For example, a director may advise a YJ worker to set more professional boundaries such as mental boundaries and time boundaries which functions as both a form of social support and boundary-setting. Those who have worked in the field for a longer duration mentioned a general lack of coping strategies at the beginning of their career; however, they have developed them over time. This suggests that facing challenges on the job may have helped them to acquire these skills and that coping strategies may be needed in order to continue working within the field. Interestingly, there appears to be a shift that is occurring as new employees are now entering the workforce with stronger boundaries and assertiveness. An executive director mentioned noticing that newer employees of a younger age demographic were more comfortable with setting boundaries in comparison to previous generations. It is possible that this difference is connected to training regarding mental-health, vicarious trauma, self-care and well-being that participants have mentioned receiving, however this area requires further exploration. Overall, it was shown that YJ professionals enter the field

out of the desire to make a positive impact on the lives of youth, yet, many of them consider changing fields during their career owing to insufficient salaries and burn-out. However, those who remain in the field despite these challenges are often able to do so as they have developed effective coping strategies.

Important to acknowledge are the limitations of this study. First, there was a niche sample that consisted of participants working with justice involved youth in community agencies. Only two participants had youth custody experience. A greater variety of YJ positions (e.g. probation officers and custody workers) is needed in future research. Additionally, there were only two male-identifying participants and therefore, a lack of equal gender representation. Lastly, a larger sample size would allow for further insight into the work. It is recommended that future studies also include a sample of YJ professionals who have chosen to leave the field in order explore the contributing factors that led to their decision to leave. This could be utilized as a foundation for strategic implementation of various preventative measures such as improved allocation of funding, parental education, and mental health policy reform to reduce the amount of staff changes amongst YJ agencies in Ontario. Lastly, it is necessary to obtain the input of YJ professionals within both samples regarding their suggestions as to how they can be better supported in their work. These suggestions would be valuable not only in improving staff retention and morale, but also in aiding in the overall success and proactivity of the YJ system.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insight into YJ professionals motivations for their work, the challenges faced, and their reasons for remaining in the field. Taking these findings into account, it is important for further research to investigate the existing gaps within the YJ system that contribute to the high turnover rate along with areas where YJ professionals can receive more adequate support. As mentioned by several participants, working with justice involved youth is essential work as it offers opportunities to change lives by intervening early, teaching youth new skills, advocating for them, providing them with resources, and being a caring adult who offers them support. By properly caring for justice-involved youth, adult justice-involvement may be prevented, offering greater protection to society as a whole.

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