



The European survey of probation staff's stress and morale

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Abstract

This study presents the first cross-European investigation into occupational stress and morale among probation staff across member jurisdictions of the Confederation of European Probation (CEP). Using a mixed-method design, data were collected from 357 individual probation officers across 20 European countries and organisational directors from 22 jurisdictions during summer 2025. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to assess emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment, while a complementary organisational questionnaire examined structural provisions for staff well-being, including primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention measures.

Results revealed moderate levels of burnout across the sample, with mean MBI scores of 21.3 (emotional exhaustion), 6.8 (depersonalisation), and 30.7 (personal accomplishment). Approximately one-third of respondents (34%) were engaged, 32% ineffective, 23% overextended or disengaged, and 12% met the criteria for full burnout. Burnout was most prevalent among staff with high caseloads and longer tenure, but demographic variables such as age and gender were not significant predictors. Organisational analyses identified three national clusters—advanced, emerging, and minimal protection—based on the degree of institutionalisation of staff support systems. Jurisdictions such as Austria, the Netherlands, and Norway demonstrated comprehensive, multi-tiered prevention frameworks, while others relied on informal, ad hoc measures.

Cross-mapping of individual and organisational data indicated that higher engagement levels corresponded closely with robust institutional prevention systems. The findings affirm that staff morale in probation work is primarily an organisational outcome rather than an individual trait. Sustainable well-being depends on formalised policies for workload governance, confidential support access, and structured reintegration after burnout. The report concludes that embedding well-being within probation systems' governance and evaluation frameworks is essential for maintaining professional efficacy, reducing turnover, and safeguarding the rehabilitative function of community corrections across Europe.

Burnout in Probation Services: An Overview

1. Background

The concept of burnout has evolved considerably since it was first introduced in the 1970s. Initially defined by Freudenberger (1974), burnout refers to a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged and excessive stress. It is commonly characterized by feelings of energy depletion, increased mental distance from one's job, and a reduced sense of professional efficacy. Terms such as *vicarious trauma* and *compassion fatigue* are often used interchangeably with burnout, particularly in professions with high emotional demands, such as correctional services (Klinoff et al., 2018; Wirkus et al., 2021).

Burnout in Probation Services

Probation officers, like many professionals in human services, are particularly vulnerable to burnout due to the inherently stressful nature of their work. Research indicates that various factors contribute to burnout among probation officers, including job demands, organisational support, and individual resilience (Whitehead, 1985; Gladfelter & Haggis, 2022).

Key Factors Contributing to Burnout

- **Role Conflict and Ambiguity:** Unclear or conflicting job expectations significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among probation officers (Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2020; Holgate & Clegg, 1991; Andersen et al., 2017; Gayman & Bradley, 2013).
- **Work-Family Conflict:** Struggles to balance professional duties with personal responsibilities are strongly associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2020).
- **Job Demands and Resources:** High workloads and emotional demands, when combined with limited resources, intensify burnout. However, personal resilience can mitigate these effects (Gladfelter & Haggis, 2022; Andersen et al., 2017).
- **Organisational Climate:** A negative organisational environment—characterized by limited involvement in decision-making and insufficient support—worsens burnout. This is particularly relevant for older officers (Holgate & Clegg, 1991; Whitehead, 1987; Gayman & Bradley, 2013).

- **Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization:** Emotional exhaustion is commonly reported by younger officers, whereas older officers more frequently experience a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Holgate & Clegg, 1991; Salyers et al., 2015).
- **Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intentions:** Low job satisfaction and high turnover intentions are strong predictors of burnout. Conversely, strong affective commitment can help reduce these outcomes (Alward & Viglione, 2023; White et al., 2015).

Overall, the organisational climate plays a critical role in influencing burnout, particularly through elements such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and exclusion from decision-making processes. These factors collectively contribute to emotional exhaustion, a central component of burnout among probation officers.

Key Organisational and Individual Influences on Burnout

- **Role Ambiguity and Conflict:** Probation officers often encounter unclear job responsibilities and conflicting demands, both of which are significant predictors of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Gayman & Bradley, 2013; Holgate & Clegg, 1991).
- **Organisational Responsiveness:** A lack of organisational support and poor responsiveness to staff concerns have been linked to higher levels of burnout. This underscores the importance of transparent communication and robust support systems (Whitehead, 1987; Finney et al, 2013).
- **Job Demands and Resources:** Excessive job demands and inadequate resources heighten stress levels and increase the risk of burnout. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model highlights the critical role of organisational factors in shaping these outcomes (Gladfelter & Haggis, 2022).
- **Participatory Atmosphere:** A collaborative work environment can help prevent burnout by reducing stigma around mental health and enhancing overall job satisfaction (Dir et al, 2019).
- **Implications for Practice Interventions:** Effective interventions should prioritize improvements in organisational climate, particularly by enhancing communication, clarifying job roles, and increasing staff participation in decision-making processes (Finney et al, 2013; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1985).
- **Support Systems:** The implementation of structured support systems, such as mentorship programs for new probation officers, can reduce burnout by alleviating role ambiguity and providing emotional support (Whitehead, 1985).

In Poland, for example, research has highlighted the unique structure of the probation system and its impact on officer burnout. A study using the Maslach Burnout Inventory

(MBI) found significant correlations between coping styles and levels of burnout among Polish probation officers (Wirkus et al., 2021).

The Role of Resilience

Resilience—the ability to recover from stress and adversity—has been identified as a crucial protective factor against burnout. Studies show that personal strengths such as hope, optimism, and access to social support are associated with increased resilience, which in turn helps reduce burnout (Klinoff et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2024). In correctional settings, resilience is known to mediate the relationship between personal characteristics and burnout levels, suggesting that resilience-building could be a valuable strategy for managing stress among probation officers (Klinoff et al, 2018).

Use of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The MBI is one of the most widely used tools for assessing burnout, particularly in European research. In Poland, for instance, it has been employed to assess burnout among probation officers, revealing strong links between coping mechanisms and burnout (Wirkus et al., 2021). Similarly, in a study of over 1,000 probation officers in England, (Philps et al, 2024) found that organisational and operational stressors were more strongly associated with burnout than individual-level factors. These findings further emphasize the need for systemic organisational change.

Critical Analysis and Gaps in the Literature

Despite significant progress in understanding burnout within probation services, notable gaps remain. Many existing studies focus predominantly on individual-level factors, often overlooking the broader organisational context. There is a pressing need for more holistic research that integrates both personal and systemic variables in the development of intervention strategies.

Additionally, while the MBI remains a valuable tool, its effectiveness may be limited by cultural and contextual factors. This highlights the need for more localized and

culturally sensitive assessment instruments (Gladfelter & Haggis, 2022; Welsh et al., 2016). Moreover, there is currently no comprehensive inventory of organisational initiatives or practices designed to enhance staff resilience or prevent burnout. This represents an important area for future research and policy development.

Conclusion

Burnout among probation officers is a complex, multifaceted issue shaped by a combination of individual, organisational, and contextual factors. While resilience has emerged as a key protective factor, further research is needed to explore its role across different cultural settings and to inform the design of tailored interventions. Although tools such as the MBI offer valuable insights, the development of more culturally relevant assessment approaches is essential. Additionally, greater attention must be paid to cataloguing and evaluating existing organisational initiatives aimed at promoting staff well-being and preventing burnout in probation services across Europe.

2. Method

Plan of investigation

a) Probation staff, in CEP Member countries, were asked to complete The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The study ran from June to August 2025 (10 weeks for data collection). Each of the participating 'CEP-member' probation services was asked to share an online survey prepared by the research team with all staff for completion. The survey was anonymous, with some questions asking about the individual, including age, gender, job role, length of employment in the service and caseload, followed by the full set of questions from the MBI (see Appendix A). All data was held securely on the UK Universities online survey website (<https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk>) until the research end date.

b) Organisations - in addition to probation staff each Director of the probation service in each country was asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix B). This questionnaire consisted of 20 questions addressing the organisational context of each service and the possible measures that might be undertaken to address staff stress.

The data from these surveys was also held securely on the UK Universities online survey website (<https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk>) until the research end date. The final datasets were downloaded from the website and analysed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics v.30.

c) The Maslach Burnout Inventory

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a validated instrument for assessing occupational burnout as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2019), with the Human Services (HS) version used for professionals working in a diverse array of occupations. The HS-Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was reproduced under licence (www.mindgarden.com/maslach-burnout-inventory-mbi/765-mbi-license-to-administer.html).

The MBI uses 22 items to measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment (see Appendix A). A sum and average score are calculated for each of these dimensions for each respondent and cut-off scores can be used to identify burnout profiles: Engaged, Ineffective, Overextended, Disengaged, and Burnout. For further information on how profiles were derived see (Maslach et al, 1996).

d) Analysis

Individual data

Summary scores and a burnout profile were calculated for each service and for the whole sample, where they were analysed by demographics, length of service and caseload. These summary statistics will then be compared descriptively across our sample and with the normative data from other populations.

Organisational Data

The survey featured a 20-item questionnaire that included open-ended questions, frequency scales with specific timeframes, and items allowing for multiple-variable responses.

The instrument deployed the public health model's three tiers and offered response categories that mirror organisational reality (e.g., *"Yes, regularly (annually or more)," "Yes, occasionally," "No," "Yes, formally established," "Informal workload adjustments (case-by-case basis)," "No specific policies or assessment methods in place," "Yes, formal and confidential," "No structured support system in place."*). Responses were dichotomized and combined into composite indices for each tier (primary, secondary, tertiary), then averaged at the country level and used to classify jurisdictions as **advanced**, **emerging**, or **minimal** in protecting staff. Unequal national sample sizes—particularly a large Polish subsample—require interpretive caution, but the cross-national patterns are strong and consistent with the literature. Nevertheless, the aggregate dataset offers a unique comparative insight into organisational infrastructures for staff well-being across Europe.

3. Results

Individual Data

Response Rate

There are 47 countries/jurisdictions in Europe and responses were received from 20 (43%) different countries. Therefore, the final response rate ranged from one to 50 for each country (Figure 1). For the six countries where responses were <3, the data were combined into "Others".

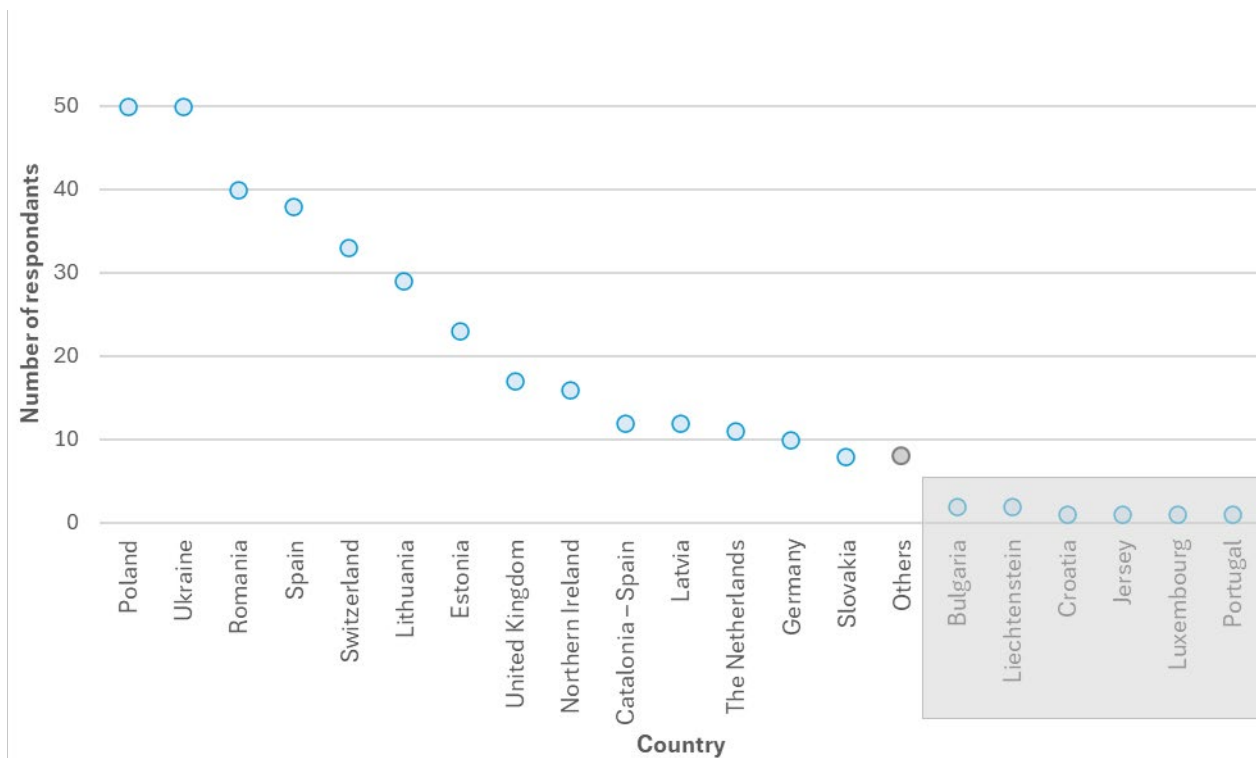


Figure 1 Responses by Country

Maslach Burnout Dimensions

The overall means of the SUM scores from our sample were 21.3 for Emotional Exhaustion, 6.84 for Depersonalisation and 30.71 for Personal Accomplishment (Table 1.). These compared most closely to Social Services norms reported for other studies (Maslach et al, 1996; Table 7.) but comparing the SDs showed that none of the sample means differed significantly from each other.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the CEP Probation Services

Probation Europe (n = 357)	Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	Depersonalization (DP)	Personal Accomplishment (PA)
Mean	21.30	6.84	30.71
SD	12.92	5.72	8.40

Scale scores calculated using Method 1 (SUM)

Identifying Burnout Profiles

Using the mean scores for respondent averages for each dimension and the standardised critical boundaries for the MBI profiles (Maslach et al, 1996), a profile was identified for each respondent using the cutoffs in Table 2.

Table 2. Cutoff boundaries of MBI Subscales across Profiles

Profile Type	Emotional	Depersonalization	Personal
	Exhaustion (EE)		Accomplishment (PA)
Engaged	<2.9	<2.6	4.0+
Ineffective	<2.9	<2.6	<4.0
Overextended	2.9+	<2.6	Not specified
Disengaged	<2.9	2.6+	Not specified
Burnout	2.9+	2.6+	Not specified

Our final sample contained only 8 / 357 Disengaged, so these were combined with the Overextended group. The original profiling study found the least difference between these two profiles which adds justification for combining them in our sample.

Average scores examined by socio-demographic variables

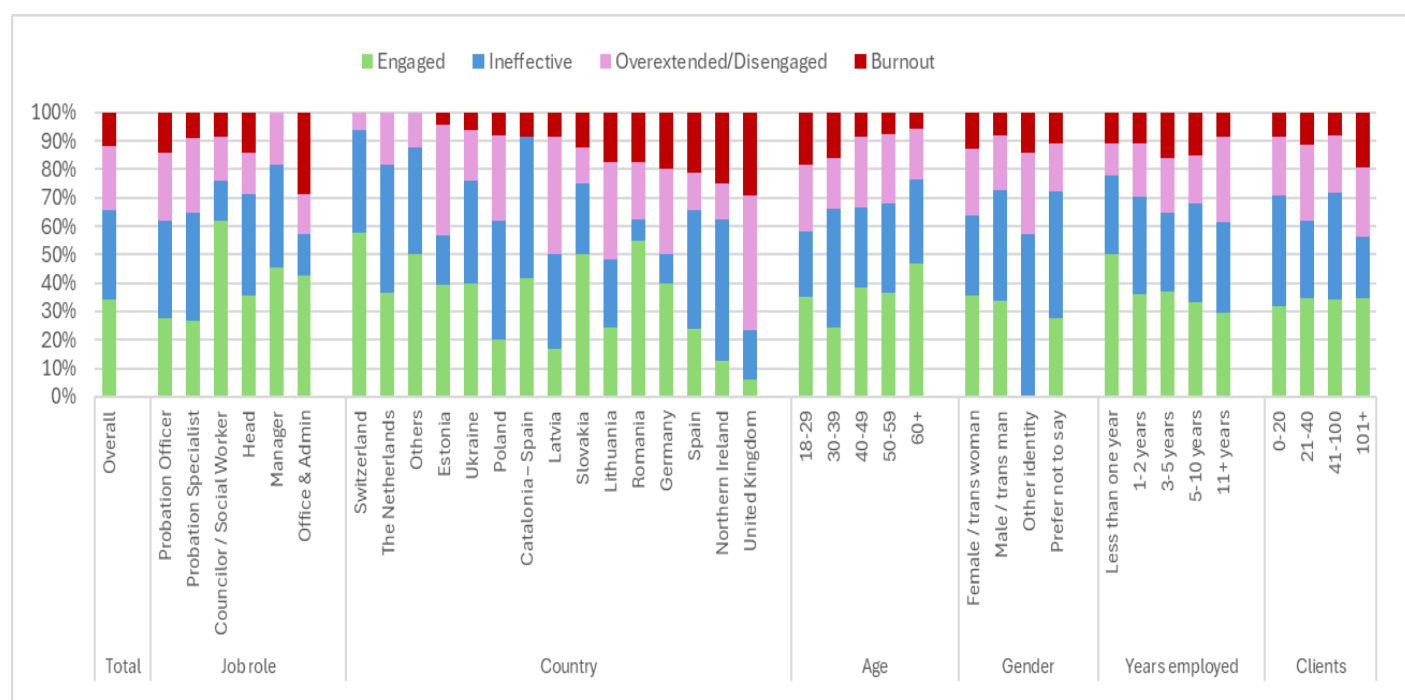
The data presented in Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the MBI average scores for each sub-scale for the various demographic measures. Although there were no statistically significant differences between countries for any of the 3 sub-scales, variation can be seen, for example, emotional exhaustion ranged from 1.1 in the Netherlands to 4.3 in the United Kingdom.

Table 2 MBI scores by socio-demographic variables

		n =	Means			Std. Deviations		
			Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	Depersonalization (DP)	Personal Accomplishment (PA)	EE	DP	PA
Total	Overall	357	2.38	1.38	3.86	1.44	1.16	1.05
Job role	Probation Officer	186	2.50	1.43	3.78	1.45	1.21	1.06
	Probation Specialist	79	2.40	1.33	3.66	1.49	1.04	1.07
	Councilor / Social Worker	58	2.25	1.27	4.38	1.31	1.17	0.75
	Head	14	1.65	1.83	3.76	1.39	1.05	1.59
	Manager	11	2.05	0.64	3.90	1.54	0.77	0.92
	Office & Admin	7	2.29	1.86	4.13	1.14	1.62	0.68
Country	Poland	50	2.70	1.28	3.49	1.30	0.98	0.84
	Ukraine	50	1.95	1.18	3.63	1.45	0.91	1.46
	Romania	40	2.76	1.40	4.46	1.43	1.32	0.86
	Spain	38	2.33	1.69	3.71	1.17	1.13	0.96
	Switzerland	33	1.31	0.94	4.03	0.79	0.81	0.98
	Lithuania	29	2.68	1.67	3.86	1.51	1.33	1.24
	Estonia	23	2.38	1.00	4.29	1.21	0.81	0.81
	United Kingdom	17	4.29	2.15	3.83	1.46	1.84	0.74
	Northern Ireland	16	3.10	1.80	3.38	1.68	1.60	0.96
	Catalonia – Spain	12	1.88	0.70	3.57	0.98	0.75	0.80
	Latvia	12	2.59	1.60	3.46	1.20	0.99	1.12
	The Netherlands	11	1.07	1.42	3.91	0.68	0.98	0.79
	Germany	10	2.20	2.04	4.38	1.31	1.37	0.48
	Slovakia	8	2.25	1.33	4.27	0.78	1.16	0.77
	Others	8	1.68	0.92	4.33	1.63	0.72	0.88
	Age	18-29	60	2.55	1.54	3.91	1.30	1.03
30-39		94	2.32	1.65	3.71	1.41	1.27	0.99
40-49		120	2.32	1.21	3.97	1.40	1.09	1.06
50-59		66	2.45	1.23	3.77	1.62	1.27	1.09
60+		17	2.20	1.07	4.13	1.69	0.73	0.96
Gender	Female / trans woman	268	2.46	1.41	3.90	1.45	1.19	1.05
	Male / trans man	62	2.07	1.27	3.87	1.38	1.16	1.05
	Other identity	7	3.02	1.86	3.25	1.64	0.70	0.79
	Prefer not to say	18	2.15	1.22	3.49	1.22	0.88	1.05
Years employed	Less than one year	18	1.62	1.17	4.19	1.39	1.22	1.02
	1-2 years	64	2.23	1.22	3.94	1.47	0.96	0.91
	3-5 years	62	2.34	1.48	3.89	1.40	1.03	1.06
	5-10 years	72	2.34	1.57	3.95	1.37	1.43	1.11
	11+ years	138	2.59	1.34	3.71	1.44	1.14	1.09
Clients	0-20	72	1.92	1.29	3.81	1.43	1.10	1.08
	21-40	95	2.51	1.40	3.93	1.61	1.34	1.11
	41-100	102	2.26	1.32	3.74	1.26	0.94	1.04
	101+	78	2.83	1.52	4.02	1.31	1.24	0.96
Maslach Profile	Engaged	122	1.50	0.81	4.76	0.86	0.64	0.51
	Ineffective	113	1.61	1.00	2.95	0.73	0.64	0.80
	Overextended/Disengaged	80	3.77	1.57	3.86	1.00	0.87	0.96
	Burnout	42	4.35	3.68	3.68	0.83	1.04	0.77

None of the variables showed any significant effect on stress and morale: type of probation staff, country of probation staff, age, gender of staff, years employed or size of caseload. Using the Maslach Profiles, the overall sample revealed that just one-third of staff (34%) were engaged, 32% were ineffective, 23% overextended/disengaged and 12% were in burnout. In Figure 2 these levels of burnout are shown by country and various demographics.

Figure 2 Proportion of staff engaged or burnt out by country



The variation by country is interesting. For example, in Switzerland and the Netherlands no staff are burnt out, and levels of staff engagement are high (nearly 60% in Switzerland). In the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, the opposite appears to be true. For the whole sample, as staff become older, they experience less burn out and engagement reduces from 50% when employed for less than one year to 30% of the whole sample after 11 plus years of employment. It is also worth noting that for those with a higher case load than 100 burn out is the highest and twice the rate of those with a caseload of 0-20 (20% vs 10%).

Organisational data

Response Rate

Participants provided their consent to take part and allowed the use of their anonymized responses. Twenty-two – out of 27 jurisdictions responded as follows: Armenia (1), Austria (1), Belgium (2), Bulgaria (1), Croatia (1), Estonia (1), France (1), Germany (2), Jersey (1), Latvia (1), Lithuania (2), Moldova (1), Norway (1), **Poland (90)**, Portugal (1), Romania (2), Slovakia (1), Slovenia (1), Spain (3), Switzerland (6), The Netherlands (1), and Ukraine (1).

Results

a) Primary prevention: structure, climate, and universal support

This tier targets the whole workforce and includes routine training on stress and vicarious trauma; formally established work–life balance provisions; a culture that supports horizontal and vertical communication and staff participation; rules and tools for workload governance; anonymous feedback mechanisms; and well-being initiatives that are actually evaluated (annually or at planned intervals). The instrument captured these elements explicitly.

Advanced performers (Austria, Croatia, Norway, Jersey, the Netherlands, France, Estonia) consistently report *regular training* on stress and resilience, *formally established work–life balance policies*, and structured organisational communication both vertically and horizontally. For example, Austria’s respondent confirmed: “Yes, *regularly (annually or more)*” to training and “Yes, *formally established*” work–life balance. These systems also use national workload tools and maintain formal anonymous feedback mechanisms.

Emerging performers (Germany, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, Switzerland) show strong training and policy foundations but rely more on informal or partial mechanisms for feedback and workload assessment. For example, Swiss managers indicated well-being initiatives exist but are assessed irregularly.

Minimal performers are the countries where training is usually *occasional or absent*, work–life balance policies are weak or informal, and workload management often relies on *“Informal workload adjustments (case-by-case basis)”* or simply *“No specific policies or assessment methods in place.”*

Primary prevention differentiates systems on a simple axis—formalization with evaluation versus informality without memory. Where policies and learning cycles exist, staff have predictable support and organisations accumulate know-how. One can argue that where policies do not exist, exposure to strain is essentially unmanaged on a scale.

b) Secondary prevention: identification, targeting, and the “infrastructure of listening”

This tier detects and supports at-risk staff. The survey asked whether organisations conduct regular assessments to identify high-risk employees (with frequencies from *“more than once a year”* to *“No”*), what methods are used (*“Psychological screening tools,” “Self-assessment surveys,” “Supervisor/staff feedback mechanisms”*), whether targeted support programs exist, and whether staff receive specialized resilience training (mandatory or optional). It also catalogued post-incident support options and whether they coalesce into a plan versus *“No structured support system in place.”*

Advanced systems (Austria, Croatia, Norway, Jersey, Estonia, France, the Netherlands) conduct *annual or more frequent burnout risk assessments*, use *psychological screening tools* or *self-assessment surveys*, and maintain *comprehensive support programs*. For example, Croatia’s responses indicate both *mandatory resilience training* and *structured peer-support*.

Emerging systems (Germany, Switzerland, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia) show some targeted support (e.g., counselling or mentorship) but less systematic risk assessment. For example, German respondents reported *limited support available* but no comprehensive screening.

Minimal systems generally answered *“No”* to burnout risk assessment and selected *“No structured support system in place”* for post-trauma measures. Many managers

repeatedly indicated the absence of systematic monitoring, noting: “No” to regular assessments and “No” to targeted support.

Secondary prevention separates systems by the presence (or absence) of an **infrastructure of listening**. Where routine risk assessments, confidential feedback loops, and targeted supports are institutionalized and reviewed, organisations detect strain early and route people into help before crises harden. Where these mechanisms are sporadic or missing, a **diagnostic vacuum** prevails: distress surfaces late, support is ad hoc, and leadership has no reliable signals to learn from or act on at scale.

c) Tertiary prevention: treatment access, protected recovery, and return-to-work

This tier assists staff already affected by burnout or vicarious trauma. The instrument asked whether staff can access professional mental-health services (fully covered, partially subsidized, staff-paid, or none); whether formal workload reduction policies or leave exist; how reintegration is supported (“*Gradual reintegration plan*,” “*Temporary workload reduction*,” “*Regular check-ins*,” “*No structured reintegration plan*”); and whether there is a confidential process for help-seeking “without fear of stigma or professional repercussions.”

Advanced systems (Austria, Croatia, Norway, Jersey, the Netherlands, France, Estonia) affirm “*Yes, fully covered services available*” for mental health, *formal workload reduction policies*, and reintegration options such as “*Gradual reintegration plan*” or “*Temporary workload reduction*.” Confidential help systems are also in place, described as “*a formal confidential support system exists*.”

Emerging systems (Switzerland, Germany, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia) is where these provisions are partial, with *partially subsidized services* or *informal workload adjustments* more common. In these cases, reintegration often lacks structure.

Minimal systems are where most respondents report “No” to mental health services, “No” to formal leave policies, and “*No structured reintegration plan*.” Confidential channels are absent or only informal.

Tertiary prevention distinguishes jurisdictions by whether recovery is **guaranteed and guided** or **privatized and precarious**. When access to clinical care is covered, leave/adjustments are formalized, and reintegration is structured with clear protections and timelines, help-seeking becomes safe and stigma declines; capacity returns in a planned way, and the organisation learns from incidents. Where these elements are absent or informal, staff navigate harm alone, recovery depends on managerial discretion, and the system accumulates a **treatment gap** that quietly erodes morale, retention, and practice quality.

Looking at the way the countries responded at all three forms of prevention, the countries maybe be clustered into three classes:

Advanced protection - Austria, Croatia, Norway, Jersey, the Netherlands, France, and Estonia. These systems report near-saturation primary coverage and strong secondary and tertiary routines (formal policies; regular training; workload tools; confidential feedback; risk assessment; covered mental-health access; formal leave and structured reintegration; post-incident protocols). They exemplify an integrated ecology of care, in which prevention tiers reinforce one another.

Emerging protection - Germany, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Switzerland. Here, primary prevention is comparatively strong, but secondary mechanisms (anonymous feedback, routine evaluation, risk screening) are partial, and tertiary supports vary. These systems would benefit most from solidifying the listening infrastructure, making confidential channels routine and binding—and from standardizing reintegration pathways.

Minimal protection - Countries in this cluster display partial primary measures and thin secondary/tertiary provision. Most of the countries in this class is where the managers frequently report occasional or absent training, missing formal policies, fragmentary workload governance (“Informal ... case-by-case”), and limited access to tertiary supports, often accompanied by the telling choice “No structured reintegration plan.”

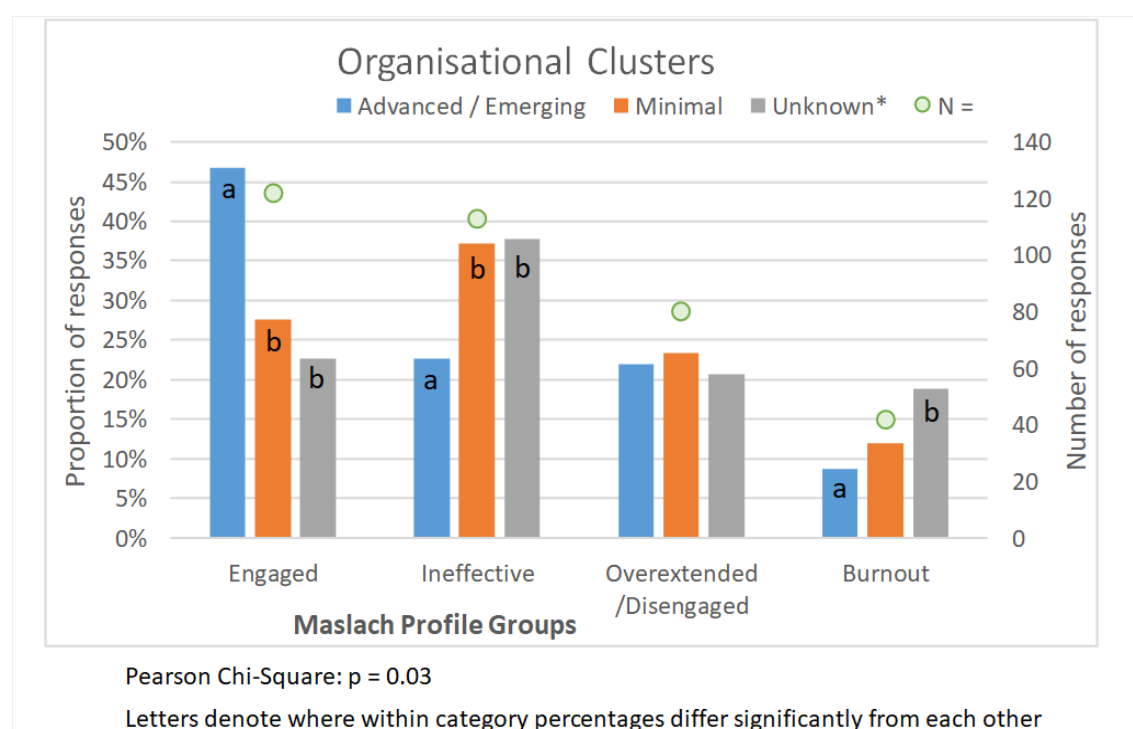
This pattern suggests a reliance on local discretion rather than systemically guaranteed care.

A note of caution is warranted here: several countries have single respondents, and national heterogeneity may be underrepresented. Nevertheless, the clustering aligns closely with item-level evidence and the qualitative patterning of responses.

c) Combined data sets (individual and organisational)

There are only eleven countries where we have high enough individual responses to the survey and at least one organisational response from a country: Switzerland, Germany, Latvia, Slovakia, Rumania, Estonia, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland and Spain. In Figure 3 the quantitative MBI scores are mapped against the qualitative categories derived from the organisational questionnaire. There are statistically significant differences in the burnout profile of the different organisational clusters. For example, those probation services with a forward-looking approach to staff stress and morale (advanced/emerging) have significantly more engaged staff and significantly fewer with burnout as measured by the MBI.

Figure 3 Organisational clusters mapped against MBI categories



4. Discussion

Adequacy of the Research Method

The mixed-method design adopted for this European study was both ambitious and methodologically sound for addressing the multifactorial nature of burnout and morale within probation services. The use of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) as the principal structured tool provided a validated and widely recognized measure of occupational burnout (Maslach et al, 1996). By pairing this quantitative assessment with a qualitative organisational questionnaire, the study captured both the individual psychological dimension of stress and the institutional determinants that shape well-being. This integration reflects a recognition that occupational stress in probation work is not merely an individual phenomenon, but a systemic outcome influenced by workload, leadership, and organisational culture (Whitehead & Lindquist, 1985; Gladfelter & Haggis, 2022).

The scale and geographic scope of the sample strengthen the validity of the findings. With 360 individual responses from 20 jurisdictions and 22 organisational questionnaires, the study offers the first cross-European comparative view of probation staff well-being. Such breadth enhances external validity, particularly given the shared structural pressures—heavy caseloads, emotional labour, and resource limitations—across European probation systems (Holgate & Clegg, 1991; Salyers et al., 2015). Furthermore, the inclusion of findings from the English national study (Phillips et al., 2024) provides a valuable point of triangulation and extends the interpretive range of the results.

Nevertheless, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-report instruments introduces potential response bias, as those experiencing higher levels of stress may have been more motivated to participate (Finney et al., 2013). Similarly, organisational leaders may have presented their services more positively due to reputational considerations. Although anonymity was maintained, social desirability effects cannot be entirely excluded. In addition, response rates were uneven across countries—with a large Polish subsample—limiting representativeness.

Cultural differences in interpreting MBI items may also have affected results, highlighting the importance of further cultural adaptation of burnout tools (Welsh et al., 2016).

Analytically, the study could be strengthened through deeper triangulation between individual and organisational data. While mapping burnout profiles to prevention tiers revealed a meaningful association, correlating individual emotional-exhaustion scores with the presence or absence of formal prevention measures could have enhanced explanatory precision. Nonetheless, the mixed-method approach remains appropriate and well executed, balancing quantitative reliability with qualitative insight. Overall, the methodology was adequate and fit for purpose, producing an empirically grounded foundation for understanding the interplay between individual stress and organisational context in European probation services.

Organisational Obligations for Staff Morale in Probation Services

The findings demonstrate that staff morale in probation work is inseparable from organisational responsibility. While personal resilience can mitigate stress (Klinoff et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2024), the primary determinants of morale are structural: workload governance, leadership style, communication climate, and access to support. The concept of organisational obligation thus extends beyond compliance with occupational-health legislation to encompass an ethical duty to create conditions in which staff can thrive.

Probation officers occupy emotionally demanding roles at the intersection of criminal justice and social care. The MBI results show that only about one-third of respondents (34 %) were fully engaged, whereas 12 % met the criteria for burnout. This pattern reflects systemic rather than personal weakness. High caseloads—particularly above 100 clients—were associated with twice the burnout rate of those handling fewer than 20, confirming that organisational design directly shapes psychological outcomes.

Cross-national analysis of the organisational survey underscores major disparities in fulfilling these obligations. “Advanced protection” jurisdictions—Austria, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Croatia, Jersey, and Estonia—have institutionalised well-being infrastructures spanning primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. These systems demonstrate regular training on stress and vicarious trauma, formal workload-management policies, confidential feedback channels, and covered access to mental-health care and structured reintegration plans. In such environments, morale is sustained through predictable and systematised support.

Conversely, “minimal protection” jurisdictions rely on informality and discretion, offering occasional training and lacking structured post-incident care. In these contexts, exposure to occupational strain is unmanaged, effectively normalising burnout as an occupational risk. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Andersen et al., 2017) helps explain this dynamic: morale and engagement depend on the equilibrium between external demands and available organisational resources. Where supervision, participation, and recognition are insufficient, staff experience depersonalisation and disengagement (Gayman & Bradley, 2013).

Beyond legal compliance, probation services carry a public-interest obligation to preserve workforce well-being. Chronic stress undermines both staff health and service outcomes, diminishing empathy and decision-making and ultimately threatening rehabilitation efficacy (White et al., 2015). Maintaining morale is therefore not simply benevolent but integral to public protection.

In short, morale flourishes where well-being is institutionalised through policy, leadership, and evaluation—and deteriorates where it depends solely on individual resilience. Organisations must therefore construct an “infrastructure of listening” that routinely detects and responds to distress through systematic prevention, early detection, and safe recovery processes.

The evidence from this study supports several practical and policy recommendations for European probation organisations and their governing bodies.

Institutionalise Whole-System Well-Being Frameworks

Well-being should be embedded within organisational strategy and operational metrics. Explicit accountability for psychological health outcomes should accompany performance indicators.

Strengthen Primary Prevention

Mandatory annual training on burnout, vicarious trauma, and resilience is essential. Formal workload-management tools and work–life-balance policies must replace ad-hoc adjustments.

Develop an Infrastructure for Listening

Introduce routine anonymous staff surveys, confidential feedback systems, and annual psychosocial risk assessments to enable early intervention and data-driven decision-making.

Expand Access to Mental-Health Support and Reintegration

Ensure all staff can access confidential counselling free of charge. Implement structured reintegration plans—including phased return and temporary workload reduction—after burnout or trauma.

Enhance Leadership Capacity and Organisational Justice

Leadership development should emphasise emotional intelligence, transparent communication, and participatory management, which are known to buffer stress and strengthen morale (Alward & Viglione, 2023).

Monitor and Evaluate Well-Being Interventions

Establish continuous evaluation cycles using standardised metrics to assess the impact of training, supervision, and policy changes on staff outcomes.

Promote European Collaboration

Create a European network or knowledge-exchange platform for probation staff well-being to share best practices, policies, and tools, building on the collaborative foundation of this study. This is especially important given the Council of Europe's

recent recommendation that the mental health of staff should be a key consideration (Council of Europe, 2025).

Advance Research and Cultural Adaptation

Future research should refine culturally sensitive measures of burnout and morale and adopt longitudinal designs to track the impact of organisational reforms over time.

4. Conclusion

This study provides unprecedented comparative insight into the determinants of stress and morale among European probation officers. The mixed-method design was appropriate and sufficiently rigorous to reveal both the prevalence of burnout and the organisational mechanisms that mediate it. The evidence confirms that staff morale is an organisational achievement rather than an individual trait.

Probation services hold an ethical and operational duty to protect and enhance staff well-being through structured, adequately resourced, and evaluated systems. Where prevention, detection, and recovery mechanisms are institutionalised, engagement thrives; where they are absent, burnout proliferates. Sustainable probation practice therefore depends on embedding well-being into the very architecture of service delivery—transforming systems from reactive to preventive and cultivating workforces that are not merely resilient but ‘thriving by design’.

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Appendix A

Burnout Self-Test Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the most commonly used tool to self-assess whether you might be at risk of burnout. To determine the risk of burnout, the MBI explores three components: exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal achievement. While this tool may be useful, it must not be used as a clinical diagnostic technique, regardless of the results. The objective is simply to make you aware that anyone may be at risk of burnout.

For each question, indicate the score that corresponds to your response. Add up your score for each section and compare your results with the scoring results interpretation at the bottom of this document.

Questions:	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
Section A:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
I feel emotionally drained by my work.							
Working with people all day long requires a great deal of effort.							
I feel like my work is breaking me down.							
I feel frustrated by my work.							
I feel I work too hard at my job.							
It stresses me too much to work in direct contact with people.							
I feel like I'm at the end of my tether.							
Total score – SECTION A							

Questions:	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
Section B:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
I feel I deal with my team/ colleagues impersonally, as if they are objects.							
I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at work.							
I have the impression that my team/ colleagues make me responsible for some of their problems.		.					
I am at the end of my patience at the end of my work day.							
I really don't care about what happens to some of my team/ colleagues.		..					
I have become more insensitive to people in the workplace.							
I'm afraid that this job is making me uncaring.		.					
Total score – SECTION B		.			.		

Questions:	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
Section C:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
I accomplish many worthwhile things in this job.					.		
I feel full of energy.					.		
I am easily able to understand what my team/colleagues feel.							
I look after my team/colleagues problems very effectively.					.		
In my work, I handle emotional problems very calmly.					.		

Through my work, I feel that I have a positive influence on people.							
I am easily able to create a relaxed atmosphere with my team/colleagues.							
I feel refreshed when I have been close to my team/colleagues at work.							
Total score – SECTION C							

SCORING RESULTS – INTERPRETATION

Section A: Burnout

Burnout (or depressive anxiety syndrome): Testifies to fatigue at the very idea of work, chronic fatigue, trouble sleeping, physical problems. For the MBI, as well as for most authors, “exhaustion would be the key component of the syndrome.” Unlike depression, the problems disappear outside work.

Total 17 or less: Low-level burnout

Total between 18 and 29 inclusive: Moderate burnout

Total over 30: High-level burnout

Section B: Depersonalisation

“Depersonalisation” (or loss of empathy): Rather a “dehumanisation” in interpersonal relations. The notion of detachment is excessive, leading to cynicism with negative attitudes with regard to colleagues, feeling of guilt, avoidance of social contacts and withdrawing into oneself. The professional blocks the empathy they can show to their colleagues.

Total 5 or less: Low-level burnout

Total between 6 and 11 inclusive: Moderate burnout

Total of 12 and greater: High-level burnout

Section C: Personal Achievement

The reduction of personal achievement: The individual assesses themselves negatively, feels they are unable to move the situation forward. This component represents the demotivating effects of a difficult, repetitive situation leading to failure despite efforts. The person begins to doubt their genuine abilities to accomplish things. This aspect is a consequence of the first two.

Total 33 or less: High-level burnout

Total between 34 and 39 inclusive: Moderate burnout

Total greater than 40: Low-level burnout

A high score in the first two sections and a low score in the last section may indicate burnout.

Note: Different people react to stress and burnout differently. This test is not intended to be a clinical analysis or assessment. The information is not designed to diagnose or treat your stress or symptoms of burnout. Consult your medical doctor, counsellor or mental health professional if you feel that you need help regarding stress management or dealing with burnout.

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Appendix B

Preventing burnout – an organisational perspective

This survey is intended to be completed by the General Director (G.D.), the top manager of the probation system, or another senior management employee designated by the G.D. To ensure accurate responses, it is essential that the respondent possesses a thorough understanding of the organisational policies and strategies implemented to prevent staff burnout and enhance resilience.

In this survey, the concept of **burnout** is defined according to Freudenberger (1974) as a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion experienced by staff members due to prolonged and excessive stress.

Additionally, the survey addresses the concept of **vicarious trauma**, which refers to the psychological impact of repeated exposure to work-related traumatic events or content. This includes case files, documents, photos, videos, interview transcripts, interactions with victimized individuals, witnessing victims' trauma, or experiencing direct or perceived threats in work-related contexts.

Primary Prevention Measures (Aimed at General Burnout Prevention)

1. **Does your organisation provide regular training on stress management and self-care for all staff?**
(Topics may include burnout recognition, managing vicarious trauma, coping with professional stress, resilience building, etc.)
 - Yes, regularly (annually or more)
 - Yes, occasionally (less than once a year)
 - No
2. **Does your organisation have established policies to promote a healthy work-life balance?** (e.g., flexible work hours, remote work options, adjusted caseloads)
 - Yes, formally established
 - Yes, informal but encouraged
 - No, there are no such policies
3. **Does your organisation implement measures to improve organisational culture and climate through:**
 - a) Horizontal communication (peer-to-peer collaboration, inter-regional idea sharing, interdisciplinary discussions)
 - b) Vertical communication (direct communication between probation counselors and top management, without unnecessary hierarchy interference)
 - c) Staff participation in local decision-making
 - d) Staff participation in strategic organisational decision-making(For each: YES/NO response options)
4. **How does your organisation assess and manage overall workload to prevent excessive stress?**
(Select all that apply)
 - Nationally established policies and workload assessment tools
 - Locally established policies and workload assessment tools
 - Informal workload adjustments (case-by-case basis)

- No specific policies or assessment methods in place
- 5. **Is there a system for employees to provide anonymous feedback on job demands and organisational support?**
 - Yes, formal and confidential
 - Yes, but informal
 - No
- 6. **Does your organisation implement local well-being initiatives, such as staff well-being programs, team-building activities, or stress-reduction interventions?**
 - Yes, regularly
 - Yes, occasionally
 - No
- 7. **If Yes to Question 6, how often is the effectiveness of these protocols assessed?**
 - Never
 - Every year
 - Every two years
 - Other (please specify) _____
- 8. **How does your organisation prioritize staff mental health?**
(Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = Not important and 5 = Very important)
- 9. **During recruitment or induction, does your organisation provide candidates with training or information on the emotional and mental health challenges of probation work?** (e.g., mandatory readings, training, briefing materials)
 - Yes, mandatory
 - Yes, but optional
 - No

Secondary Prevention Measures (Aimed at Preventing Burnout Among Vulnerable Staff)

- 10. **Does your organisation conduct regular assessments to identify employees at high risk of burnout?**
 - Yes, more than once a year
 - Yes, annually
 - Yes, but less than once a year
 - No
- 11. **If burnout risk is assessed, what methods are used?** (Select all that apply)
 - Psychological screening tools
 - Supervisor/staff feedback mechanisms
 - Self-assessment surveys
 - Other (please specify) _____
- 12. **Are targeted support programs available for employees at risk of burnout?** (e.g., counselling, peer support groups, mentorship)
 - Yes, comprehensive support program available
 - Yes, limited support available
 - No
- 13. **What specific support measures does your organisation provide following staff exposure to traumatic events, critical incidents, or distressing case material?**
(Select all that apply)

- Psychological first aid or crisis intervention
 - Mandatory debriefing sessions
 - Optional therapy or counselling services
 - Peer-support programs
 - Other (please specify) _____
 - No structured support system in place
- 14. Is there specialized training available to help staff build resilience and manage the emotional demands of probation work?**
- Yes, mandatory for all staff
 - Yes, optional
 - No

Tertiary Prevention (Aimed at Assisting Those Experiencing Burnout)

- 15. Does the organisation offer access to professional mental health services for staff experiencing burnout or severe work-related stress?**
- Yes, fully covered services available
 - Yes, partially subsidized services available
 - Yes, but staff must pay for services
 - No
- 16. Are there policies in place to adjust workloads or provide leave for staff recovering from burnout?**
- Yes, formal workload reduction policies exist
 - Yes, but only informal adjustments are made
 - No
- 17. If workload adjustments or leave are provided, how does the organisation support reintegration upon return? (Select all that apply)**
- Gradual reintegration plan
 - Temporary workload reduction
 - Regular check-ins with supervisors or HR
 - No structured reintegration plan
- 18. Does your organisation provide a confidential process for employees to seek help for burnout or vicarious trauma without fear of stigma or professional repercussions?**
- Yes, a formal confidential support system exists
 - Yes, but informal only
 - No
- 19. Does your organisation have best practices in burnout prevention and resilience that could be shared with other jurisdictions?**
- Yes (please provide a brief summary: objectives, activities, evaluation, website, etc.)
 - No
- 20. Would you be open to being contacted for further information?**
- Yes, my email is: _____
 - No