

TWO YEARS OF COVID-19: DIPLOMATIC PARTNERS AND SPOUSES DURING A PANDEMIC

RESEARCH REPORT SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. All regions of the world have since been affected, with the pandemic peaking, receding and peaking again at different times in different regions. As of mid-December 2022, WHO has reported over 643 million confirmed cases and more than 6,6 million deaths globally. Although a significant proportion of the world population has been vaccinated, the pandemic is ongoing.

EUFASA AISBL represents families of European foreign service officers¹ who spend a significant part of their career abroad, relocating internationally every few years. European foreign ministries have been faced with responding to the rapidly changing global crisis to protect their employees and their families across the world. The EUFASA Research Department conducted two surveys (in December 2020 – February 2021, and in March – April 2022) among foreign service partners and spouses to examine the impact of the pandemic on this globally mobile population, with a focus on resilience, personal burnout, and organizational support. This report summarizes the findings of the two studies, and provides statistical results for the individual questions in both surveys.

Findings from the first survey on burnout and resilience during the pandemic were published in *Sustainability* in January, 2023. The article can be accessed at <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/3/2435>.

¹ Although diplomacy and other foreign service careers such as consular work are distinct in some foreign service systems, we use the terms “diplomat” and “foreign service officers” interchangeably in this report as all foreign service officers – and their partners and spouses – face similar challenges related to their high international mobility.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The EUFASA Research Department conducted several on-line interviews with members of the target group in September 2020 at the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic to determine the main concerns the pandemic created for diplomatic families. Based on these preliminary interviews, a questionnaire with 26 questions was compiled and tested. The focus was on the main sources of stress, resilience, and burnout as measured with the Connor-Davidson 10-item resilience scale and the personal burnout assessment from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory. It also included questions on official support from ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and work-life conflict. The on-line anonymous survey was conducted among partners and spouses of foreign service officers in December 2020 – February 2021.

Questions about COVID-19 vaccinations and coping mechanisms were added for a follow-up study on burnout and resilience in early 2022. When the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine during the last stages of the questionnaire development and testing in February 2022, the research team added three questions to assess how events in Ukraine may have impacted stress levels in this population. The final follow-up questionnaire was comprised of 22 questions and was conducted in March – April 2022. Both surveys were circulated among diplomatic partners via EUFASA member organizations, several European MFAs, and an online group of diplomatic spouses.

Confidentiality

All respondents were guaranteed anonymity. Quantitative data in this report are presented as aggregate data using simple graphic analysis. Qualitative data have been coded and categorized.

Demographics of respondents

In the first study (2021), a total of **421 respondents**, and in the second study (2022) a total of **328 respondents**, completed the online anonymous survey. The demographic characteristics of both samples were similar. The majority of respondents were women (75% in 2021 and 70% in 2022). The age groups were represented relatively evenly, with most respondents being over 40 years old. About half (54% in 2021 and 50% in 2022) of respondents had at least one child under the age of 16 living with them in the same household. A significant proportion of respondents (35% in 2021 and 39% in 2022) was born in a different country than the foreign service officer. Most respondents were partners of diplomats representing a European country or the EU (EEAS).

Diplomatic partners and spouses are characteristic for their high international mobility. Over 40% of respondents in both samples reported that they had made an international move 5–9 times in their adult life. In the first study, one quarter (25.6%) of respondents had been at their current location for less than one year; 39.4% from one year up to three years; and 22.1% for three to four years. More than one quarter (28.6%) made an official move during the first ten months of the pandemic.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a very stressful period for diplomatic partners, who showed **low resilience scores and high personal burnout**, as measured with Connor-Davidson's 10-item resilience scale (CD-RISC 10) and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) personal burnout scale. Although no baseline data exist for resilience among foreign service partners and spouses, other studies suggest an average resilience of 80 out of 100 in the general population in western societies. Ten months into the pandemic, the average resilience score among our respondents was about 14% below that level, at 69.2². In early 2022, average resilience had increased to 74, close to what we assume to be a normal value for this group. There was also some improvement in burnout levels between the first and second studies. At the beginning of 2021, the average personal burnout score of respondents was 41.5 out of 100. In March 2022, the average burnout score had dropped by a few points but still remained relatively high, at 38 out of 100.

The first study showed that **exposure to the pandemic was high** among diplomatic partners/spouses already in late 2020 and early 2021. Nearly two thirds (60%) said the pandemic was a significant problem where they were posted, 89% knew someone who had contracted the virus, and 10% had already had a family member or close friend die of the virus. In the follow-up study, no respondents reported having been hospitalized due to COVID-19 (perhaps due to reporting bias, as people who were sick enough to have been hospitalized may also be less likely to have answered the survey due to developing long COVID, being hospitalized during the survey, or perhaps death); and a quarter (25%) reported that a close friend or family member had died of COVID-19.

In the follow-up study in March – April 2022, **85% of respondents reported having been fully vaccinated**, a higher vaccination rate than found in many countries. This may indicate a higher acceptance of vaccination when international travel is required, vaccination requirements to enter some countries after vaccinations became available in 2021, and, perhaps in some foreign service systems, better access to vaccination than the general public.

The first year of the pandemic brought a significant increase in workload. A great majority of respondents (71%) reported they felt the pandemic significantly affected their ability to work and/or the way they spend their time. Nearly 60% of respondents reported their partner's (the foreign service officer's) workload increased. The pandemic also resulted in more work in the home for partners/spouses; nearly 70% of respondents reported that their household chores had increased. Among respondents with children under age 16 at home, 55% reported home schooling as a stress factor, and this stress increased with the number of children.

Separation from, and concern about, family members appeared to be one the most stressful aspects of the pandemic. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents reported that the health and safety of family and loved ones living somewhere else was the most stressful aspect of the pandemic, followed by 60% of respondents who were stressed about not being able to travel. Given that foreign service families are often posted outside of their home countries, we assume that this result may be related to the respondents' concerns about the well-being of loved ones far away.

² CD-RISC 10 results were normed to allow comparison with the longer form CD-RISC 25.

Additionally, nearly one third of all respondents (31%) in 2021 reported they had been separated for a period of time from a family member(s) who usually live(s) in the same household, because of the pandemic.

As we expected, the **sources of stress shifted between the first and second study periods**. The follow-up study in early 2022 had been intended to measure burnout and resilience during a “more normal” period for partners and spouses once vaccination had become widely available, but the invasion of Ukraine immediately before the follow-up study caused additional self-reported stress for many partners and spouses. In March–April 2022, respondents reported feeling much more stress about the situation in Ukraine than about COVID-19. Over 60% of respondents said they felt affected by the war, although only 15% reported having family or close friends in the region.

Organizational support from MFAs was insufficient. In the first study, only one quarter (24%) of respondents felt they received enough support and information from their MFA, and one quarter (26%) was not aware of any assistance provided by their MFA. The form of support the respondents knew about most (41%) was clear policy measures from the MFA to reduce risks of contracting COVID-19; this support was also considered by respondents to be helpful.

Although these measures improved marginally in the follow-up study, **organizational support appeared to remain insufficient in early 2022**, with the majority of respondents (68%) reporting in early 2022 they did not have a contact at the MFA, or did not know if there was such a contact person. More than a fifth (22%) wished for better information/communication from the MFA. Of the respondents who received assistance from their MFA in getting vaccinated, only slightly more than half (56%) reported having a positive experience with the process.

Several measures offered by MFAs appear to effectively support partners’ mental health.

Respondents who knew that they could be evacuated if needed were found to have significantly greater resilience. Partners who knew they had a designated contact person at their MFA had significantly lower personal burnout scores. Those who said that their MFA had a clear policy and/or measures abroad to reduce risk were also less likely to have indications of personal burnout. Interestingly, tips or workshops on managing stress offered by MFAs were associated with higher personal burnout scores; this may be because this support was only introduced once stress levels were already very high, while the content of resilience workshops is typically more preventive in nature (in other words, such workshops may be helpful, but must be offered before a crisis occurs). Partners/spouses with higher resilience were also found to be less likely to have indications of personal burnout.

In the follow-up study, respondents were asked in an open-ended question to share **coping mechanisms** which had been helpful for them in managing pandemic-related stress. Their responses were then categorized and coded. By far the most common coping mechanism (51%) was **social support**, spending time with family and friends. This was followed by **positive distraction** / keeping busy with work, hobbies or volunteer work (19.2%), **exercise and sports** (17.9%), and **getting outside/spending time in nature** (13.2%). Many other coping mechanisms were mentioned, including mindfulness techniques (5.6%), having good information (5.3%), keeping a positive attitude (4.6%), or walking the dog/spending time with pets (3.3%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MFAs

The results of these two studies suggest several lessons MFAs can learn from the experience with COVID-19. We recommend that MFAs **provide timely and trustworthy information directly to partners and spouses** about the measures of support they offer. This **communication appears to be most effective when provided by a Family Office or designated contact person for partners and spouses at the MFA.**

MFAs can further support partners'/ spouses' own coping in a crisis by committing to evacuation of employees and families if necessary, and informing transferable families accordingly, as simply knowing about this support appears to improve resilience. The possible risks and potential benefits should be carefully weighed before separating family members who usually live together.

While MFAs cannot replace family and friends or directly provide opportunities for positive distraction, they can support spouses' coping mechanisms for example by **enabling partners/spouses to follow their own careers** (which is not only a positive distraction, but can also increase the willingness of employees to accept postings abroad, contribute to couples' financial stability, and improve the retention of foreign service employees); and **providing housing/supporting housing options that meet families' needs** (which provides, for example, enough space to accommodate working from home and the chance to go outside).

Finally, **adequate and accessible psychological support should be made available** for MFA employees and their family members.

Tabulations of the original data are provided below. For more information about the studies, contact the EUFASA Research Department: research@eufasa.org

TABULATIONS

ORIGINAL STUDY (2021)

1. What is the country (sending state) of your MFA? (Please indicate the country)

58 sending states are represented in the 421 observations. The table below shows sending states with more than 2 observations.

Sending state	Respondents	Sending state	Respondents
Austria	54	Latvia	15
Belgium	11	Lithuania	7
Czechia	30	Luxembourg	3
EEAS	7	Mexico	3
Estonia	8	Portugal	22
Finland	12	Serbia	3
France	19	Spain	39
Germany	10	Switzerland	17
Iceland	4	The Netherlands	7
India	3	UK	40
Ireland	45	USA	6
Italy	16		

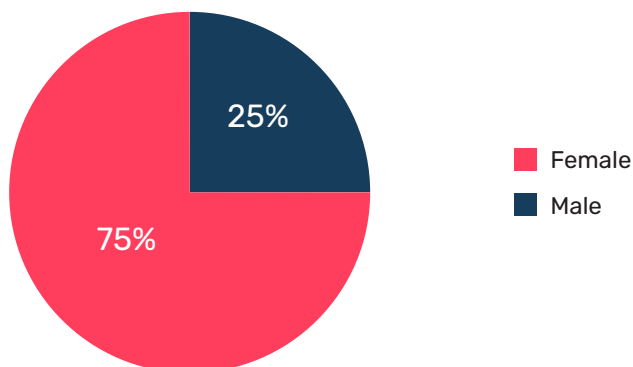
2. What is the seniority/rank of your spouse/partner (MFA Officer) at your current posting (or your last posting if not currently on posting)?

Seniority of officer	Respondents	% of respondents
Senior Diplomat	179	43%
Head of Mission	117	28%
Junior Diplomat	85	20%
Other	40	9%
Total	421	100%

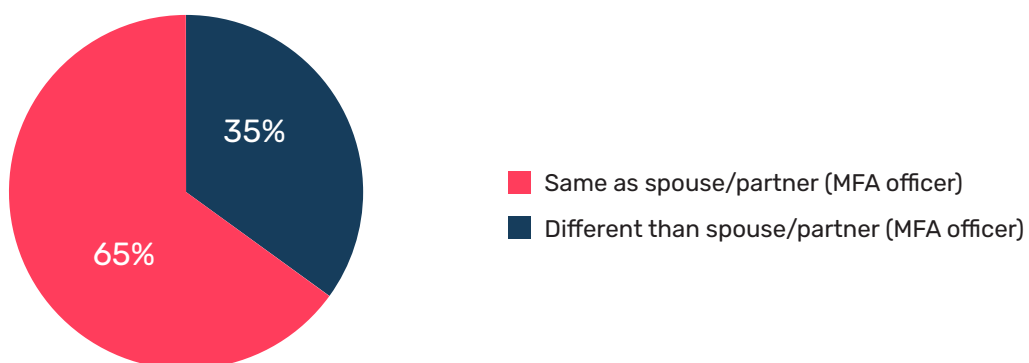
3. How many times have you moved internationally as an adult for any reason? (Please indicate the number)

	Respondents	% of respondents
0-4	202	48%
5-9	177	42%
10 or more	42	10%
Total	421	100%

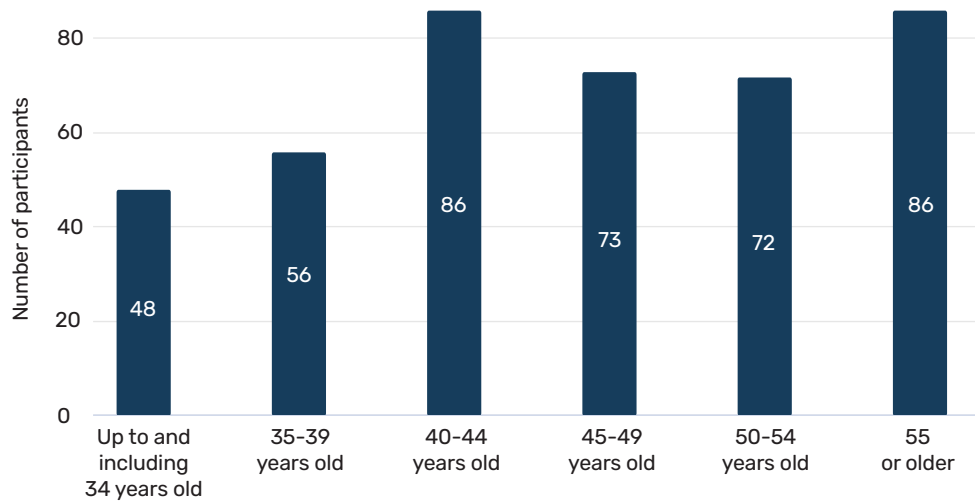
4. Gender: What is your gender?



5. Nationality: What is your nationality by birth?



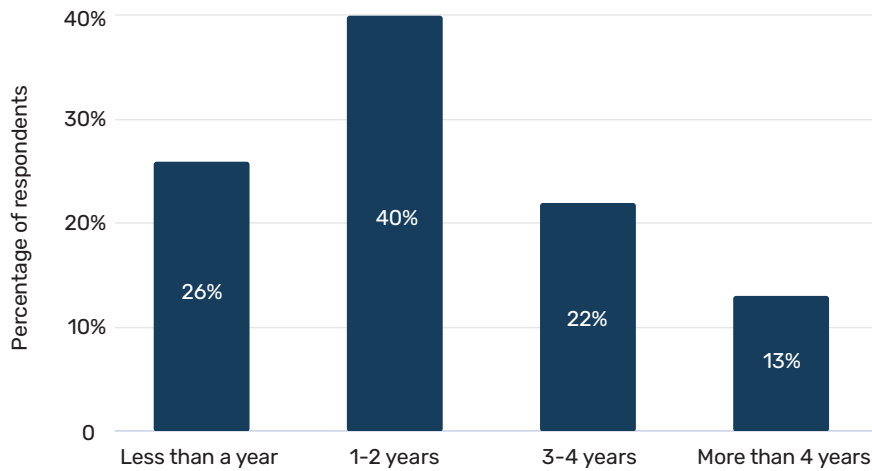
6. What age are you?



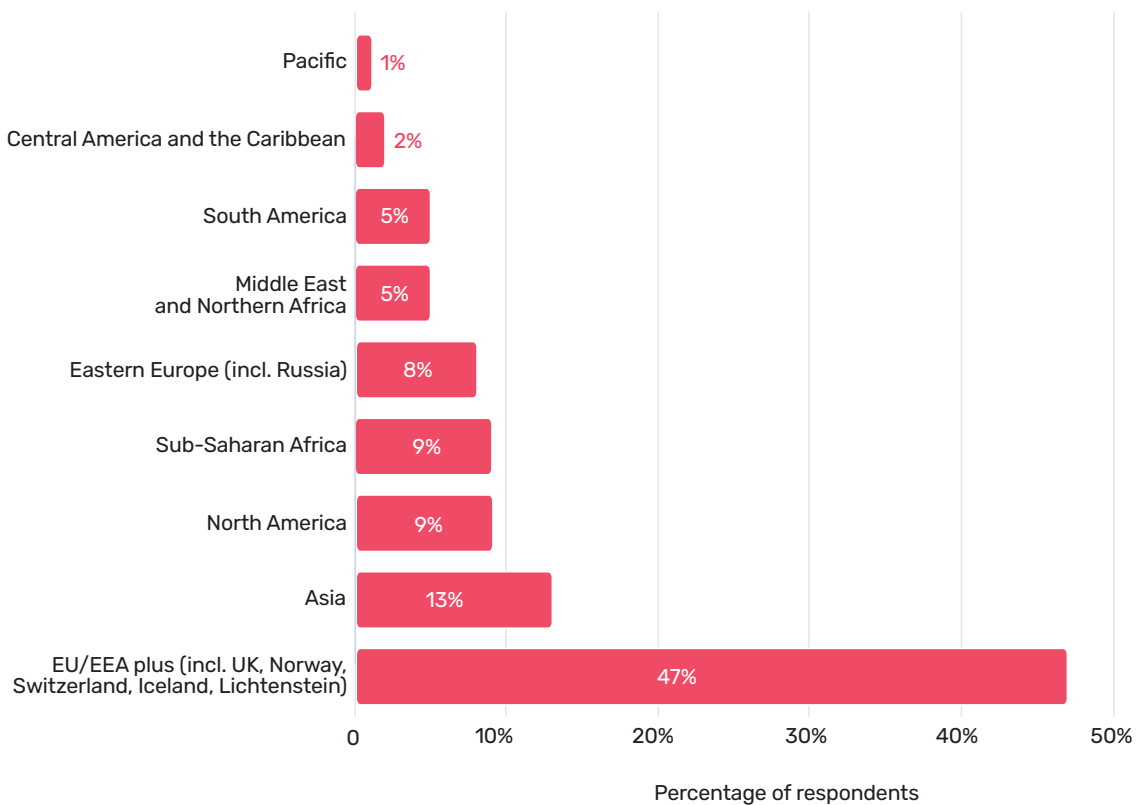
7. How many children age 15 and under currently live with you in the same household?

Number of children	Respondents	% of respondents
0	192	45,6%
1	90	21,4%
2	104	24,7%
3	27	6,4%
More than 3	8	1,9%
Total	421	100%

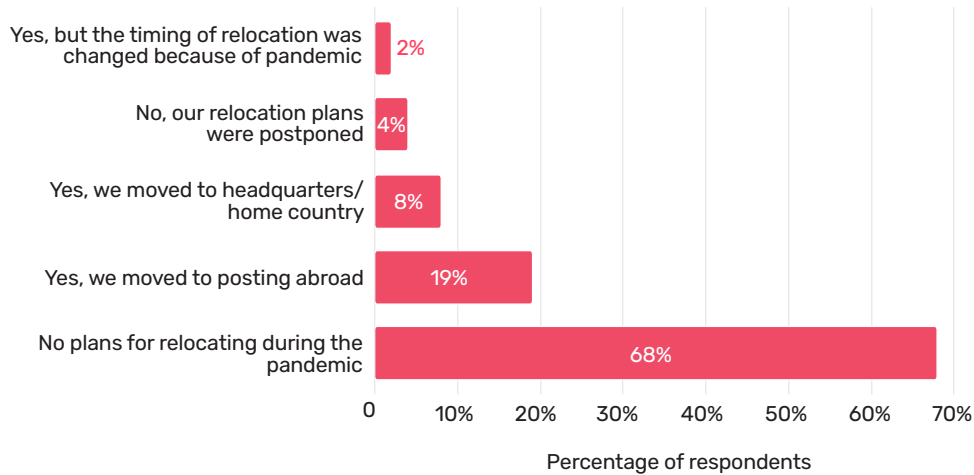
8. How long have you lived in your current country of residence (whether at a posting abroad or at headquarters/home country)?



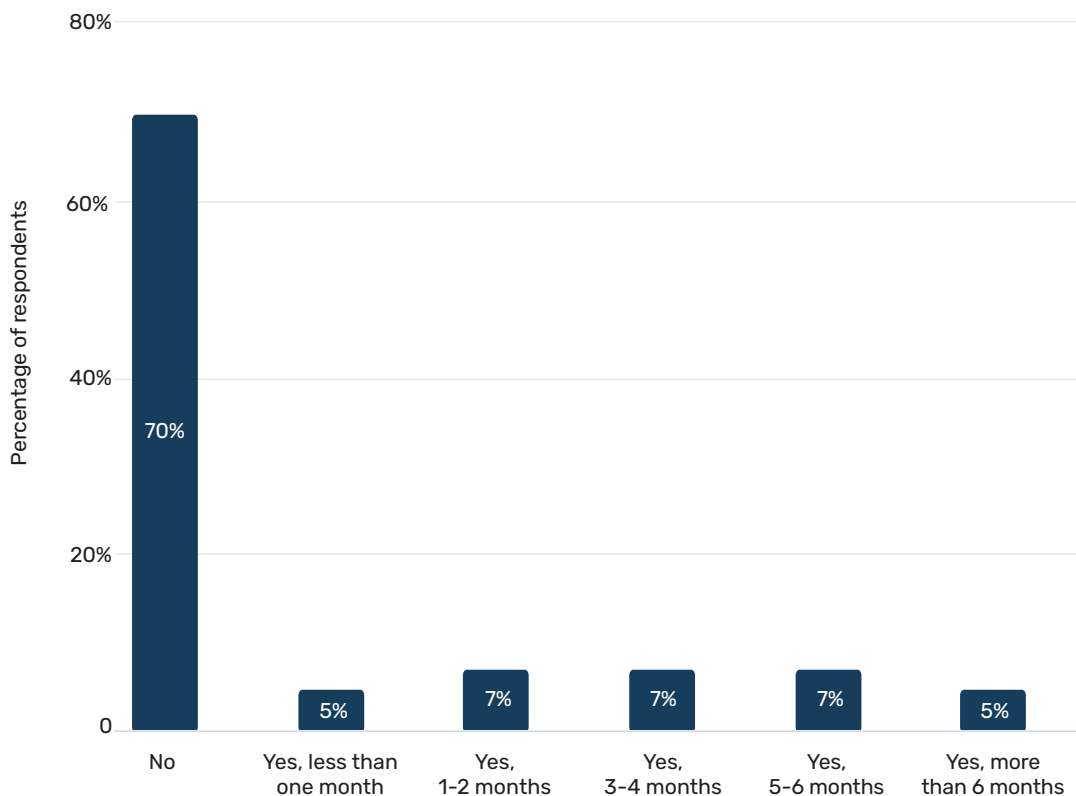
9. Where are you currently posted?



10. Did you have an official move during the COVID-19 pandemic?

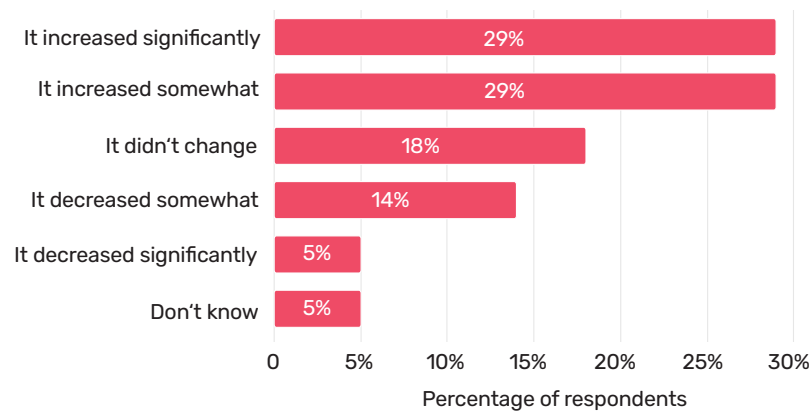


11. Have you been separated for a period of time from a family member(s) who usually live(s) in your household, due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



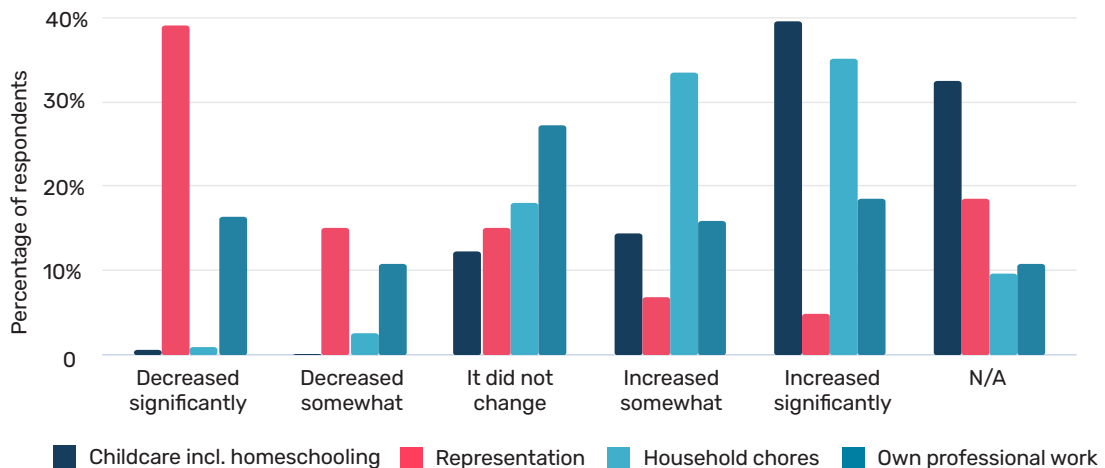
STRESS 2021

12. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the workload of your spouse/partner (MFA officer)?



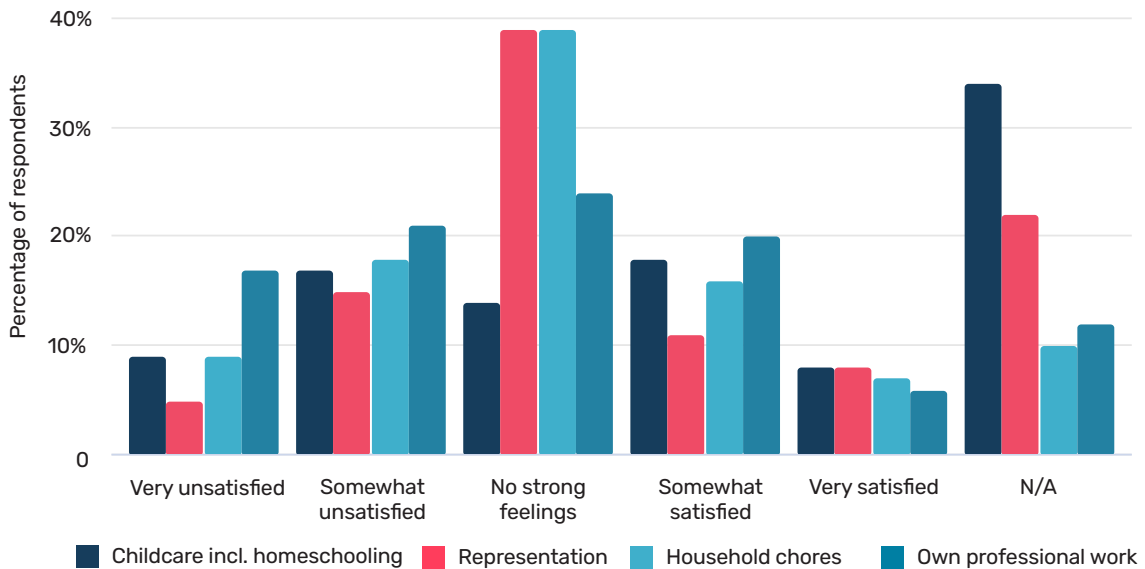
13. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your own workload in the following areas?

- Childcare incl. homeschooling: Responsibilities/workload related to childcare, including homeschooling
- Representation: Workload related to representation activities of the MFA Officer
- Household chores: Workload related to MFA Officer working from home (including cooking more meals, more time helping partner/spouse manage work-related stress, etc.)
- Own professional work: Hours spent on professional work (including self-employment, unpaid work, volunteering)

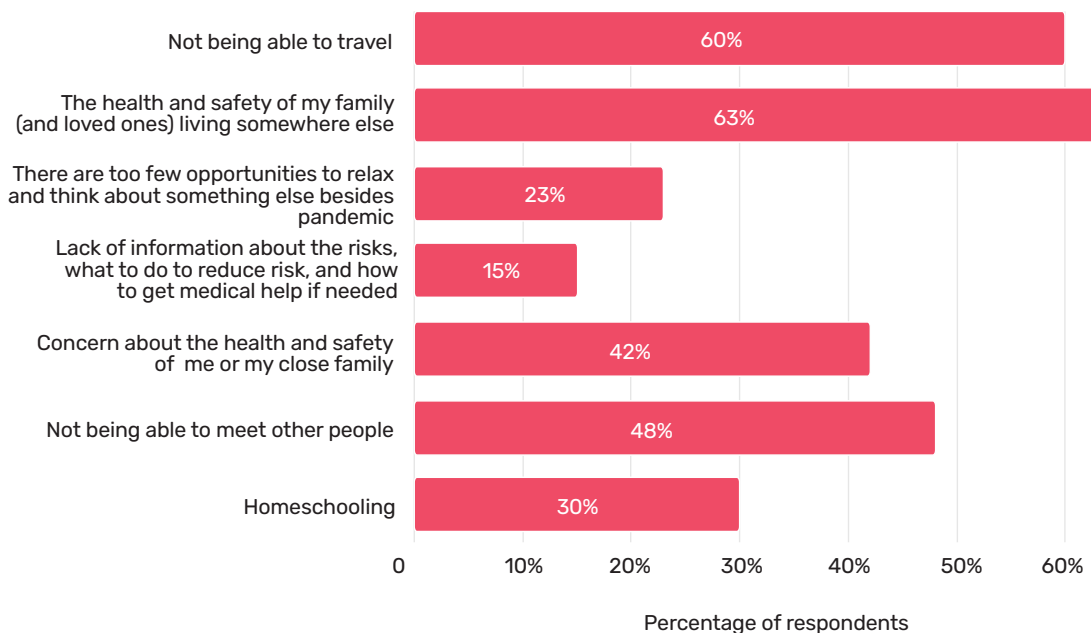


14. How satisfied are you with your current workload in the following areas? [Responsibilities/workload related to childcare (including homeschooling)]

See question 13 for explanations of categories.



15. What have been the most stressful aspects of the pandemic for you personally? (Please, choose up to 3 options)



EXPOSURE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC 2021

16. How big of a problem has the COVID-19 pandemic been overall where you have been living (or spent the most time) during the pandemic?

	Respondents	% of respondents
It has not been much of an issue / we are in a low-risk area	37	9%
It's been an issue, but not always the biggest one	128	30%
It's been a very significant problem / we are in a high-risk area	256	61%

17. To the best of your knowledge have you or someone you personally know contracted the COVID-19 virus?

	Respondents	% of respondents
No	49	12%
Yes - myself, immediate family member or a close friend	133	32%
Yes - someone else I know personally	239	57%

18. Were you or was someone you personally know hospitalized because of COVID-19?

	Respondents	% of respondents
No	230	55%
Yes - myself, immediate family member or a close friend	47	11%
Yes - someone else I know personally	144	34%

19. Do you know anyone who died due to COVID-19?

	Respondents	% of respondents
No	267	63%
Yes - a family member or a close friend	42	10%
Yes - someone else I know personally	112	27%

20. How much of an effect has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your personal life?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Very little effect on my personal life	16	4%
Somewhat affected the way I spend my time	106	25%
Significantly affected my ability to work and/or the way I spend my time	299	71%

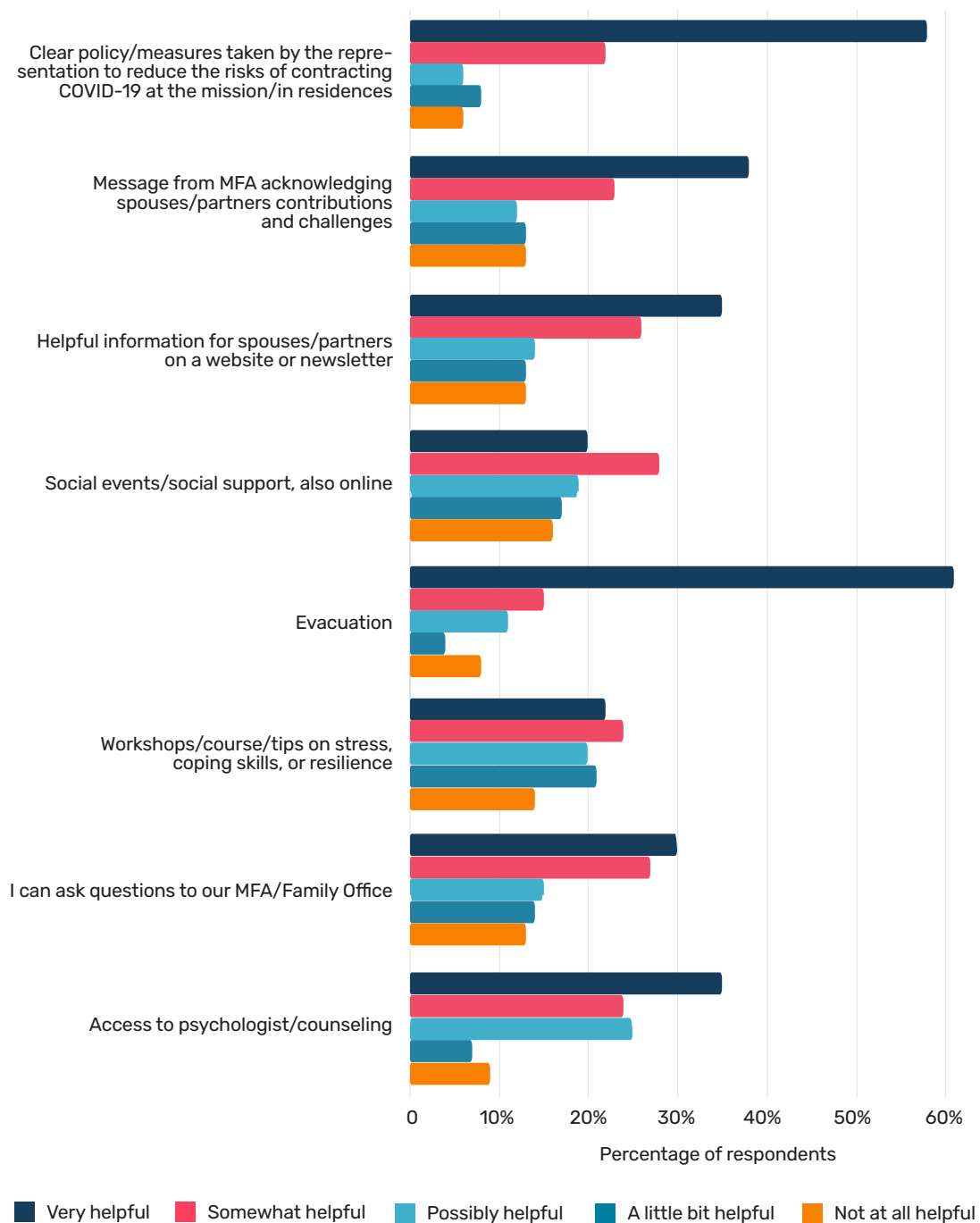
SUPPORT MEASURES 2021

21. Which of the following measures or assistance does your MFA provide to support spouses/partners during the pandemic or in times of stress in general? (Please, choose all relevant options)

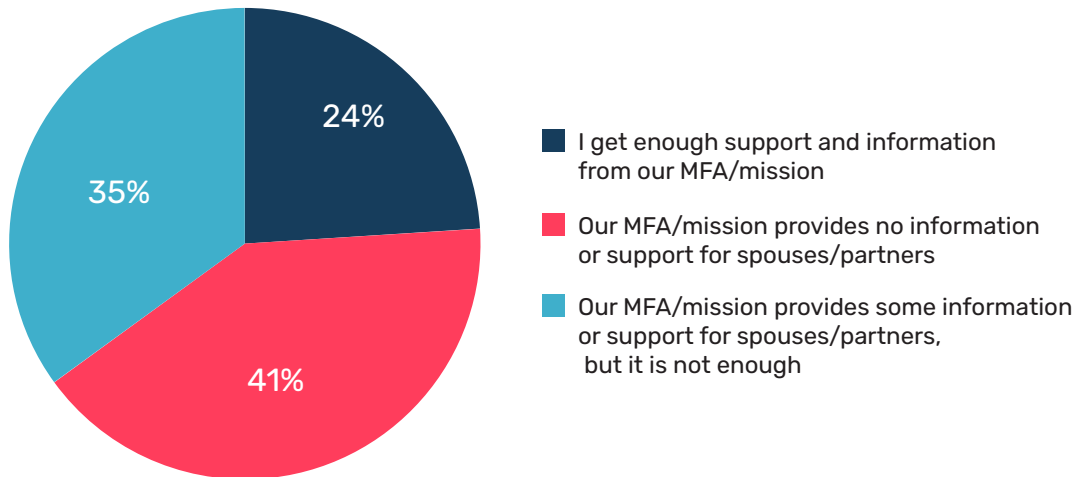
	Respondents	% of respondents
Access to psychologist/counseling	72	17%
I can ask questions to our MFA/Family Office	90	21%
Workshop/course/tips on stress, coping skills, or resilience	58	14%
Helpful information for spouses/partners on a website or newsletter	80	19%
Evacuation if needed	115	27%
Clear policy/measures taken by the representation to reduce the risks of contracting COVID-19 at the mission/in residences	171	41%
Social events / social support, also online	57	14%
I don't know of any assistance offered by the MFA	110	26%

Responses total more than 100% as respondents could indicate multiple answers.

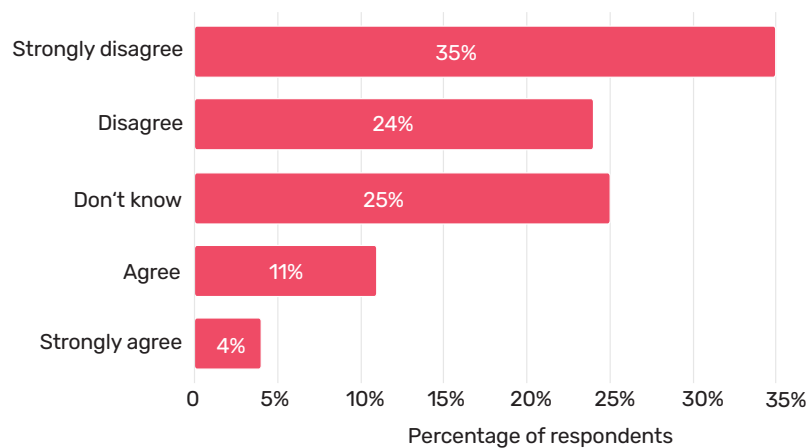
22. How helpful do you find the following measures in dealing with stressful situations (even if you have not used them, or if they are not currently offered by your MFA)?



23. Which of the following statements feels most accurate for you?



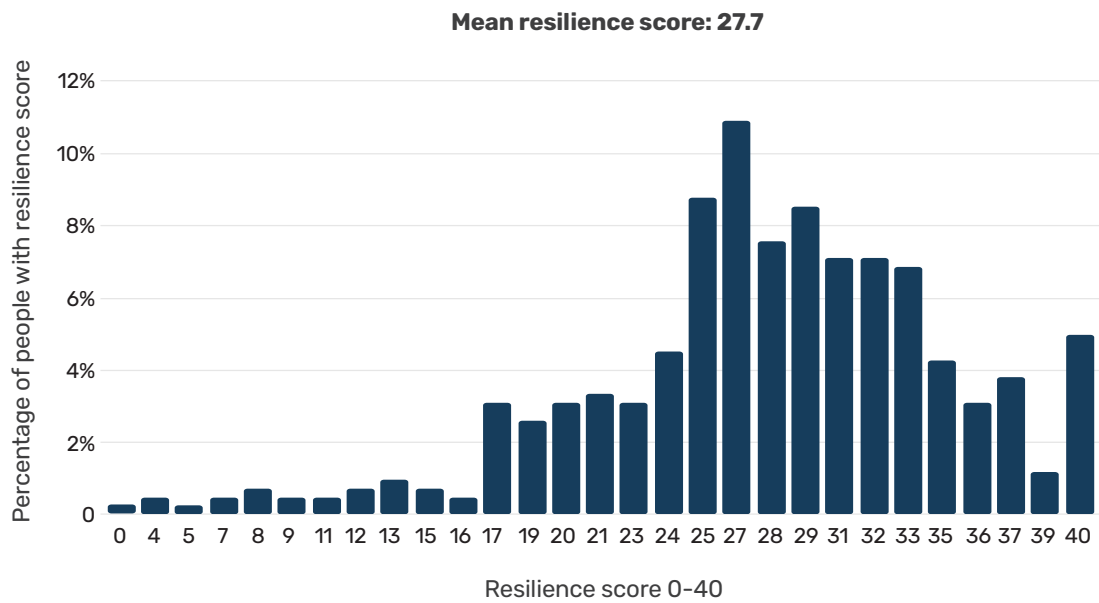
24. How much do you agree with the following statement: "My MFA recognizes my contribution as a partner/spouse of an MFA Officer and the challenges I face during the COVID-19 pandemic."



RESILIENCE 2021

25. Resilience score (CD-RISC 10)

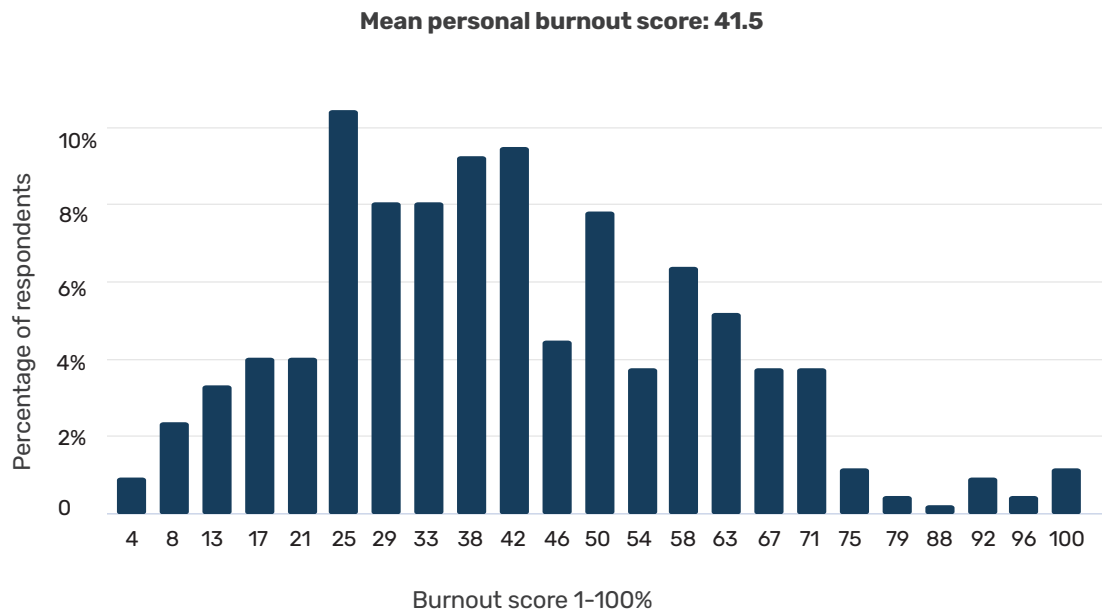
Resilience was measured with the 10-item Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-RISC 10). For each participant the scores from the 10 questions (not shown) are added, resulting in a total resilience score for each respondent between 0 (minimal resilience) 40 (high resilience).



BURNOUT 2021

26. Personal burnout score (CBI)

Personal burnout was assessed with the personal burnout subscale (six questions, not shown) from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory.



GENERAL RESULTS STUDY 2 (2022)

1. What is the country (sending state) of your MFA? (Please indicate the country)

51 sending states are represented in the 328 observations. The table below shows sending states with more than 2 observations.

Sending state	Respondents	Sending state	Respondents
Albania	3	Ireland	10
Austria	14	Italy	15
Belgium	5	Latvia	5
China	3	Peru	4
Czechia	31	Portugal	9
EEAS	7	Spain	22
Estonia	7	Switzerland	53
EU	11	The Netherlands	17
Finland	4	Tunisia	3
France	4	Ukraine	4
Germany	16	United Kingdom	30

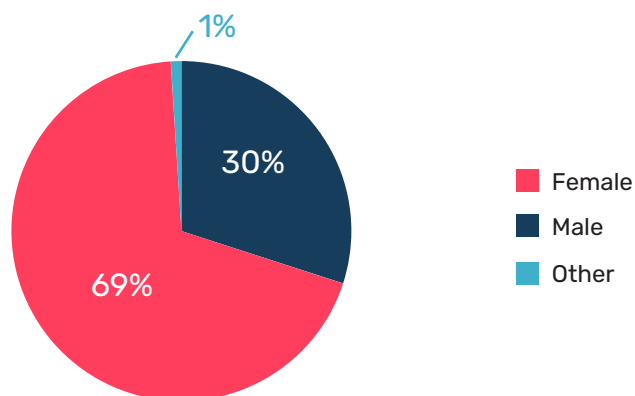
2. What is the seniority/rank of your spouse/partner (MFA Officer) at your current posting (or your last posting if not currently on posting)?

Seniority of officer	Respondents	% of respondents
Senior Diplomat	170	52%
Head of Mission	90	27%
Junior Diplomat	50	15%
Other	18	6%
Total	328	100%

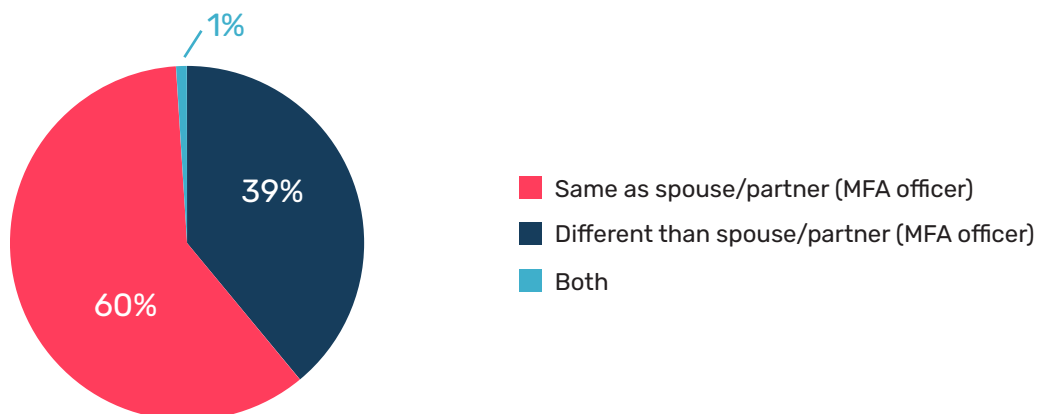
3. How many times have you moved internationally as an adult for any reason? (Please indicate the number)

	Respondents	% of respondents
0-4	142	43%
5-9	141	43%
10 or more	45	14%
Total	328	100%

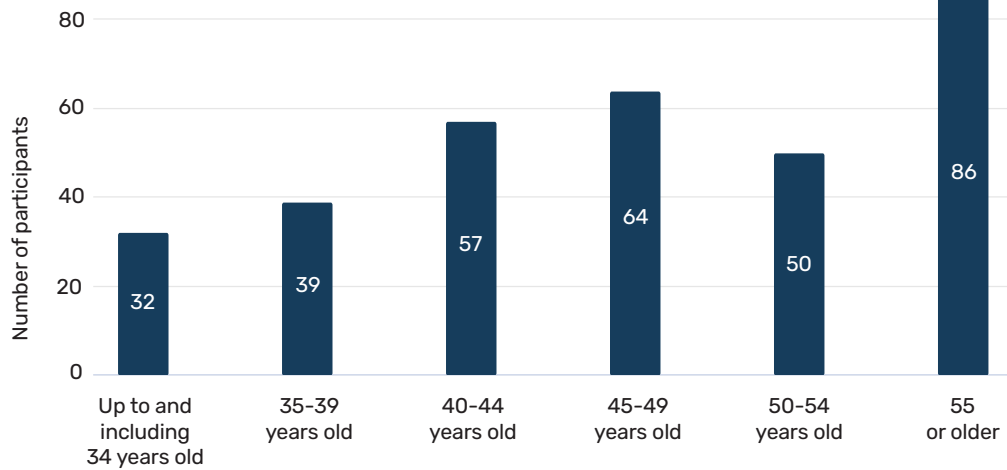
4. Gender: What is your gender?



5. Nationality: What is your nationality by birth?



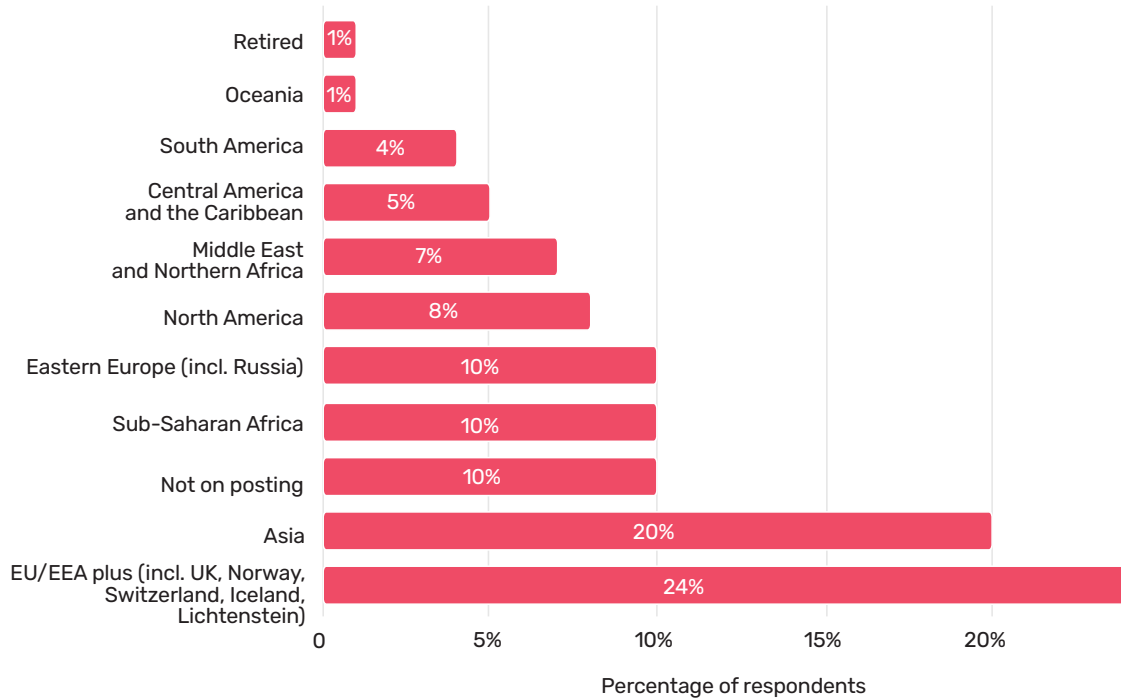
6. What age are you?



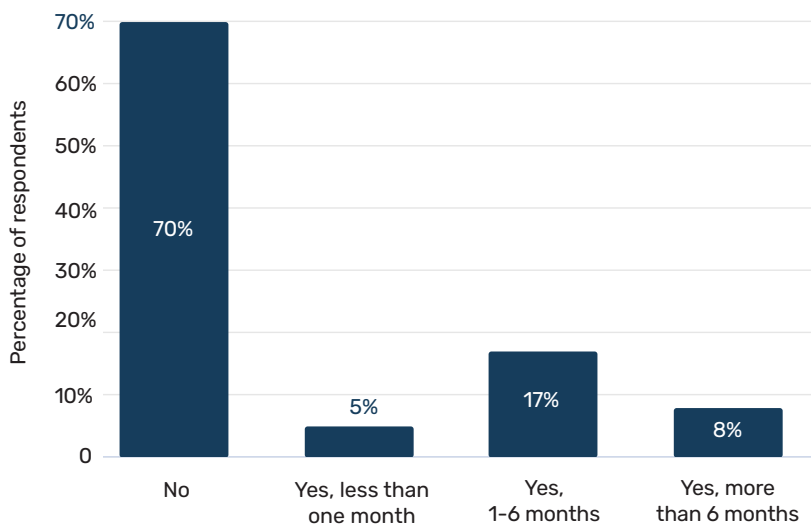
7. How many children age 15 and under currently live with you in the same household?

Number of children	Respondents	% of respondents
0	164	50%
1	67	20%
2	72	22%
3	22	7%
More than 3	3	1%
Total	328	100%

8. Where are you currently posted?



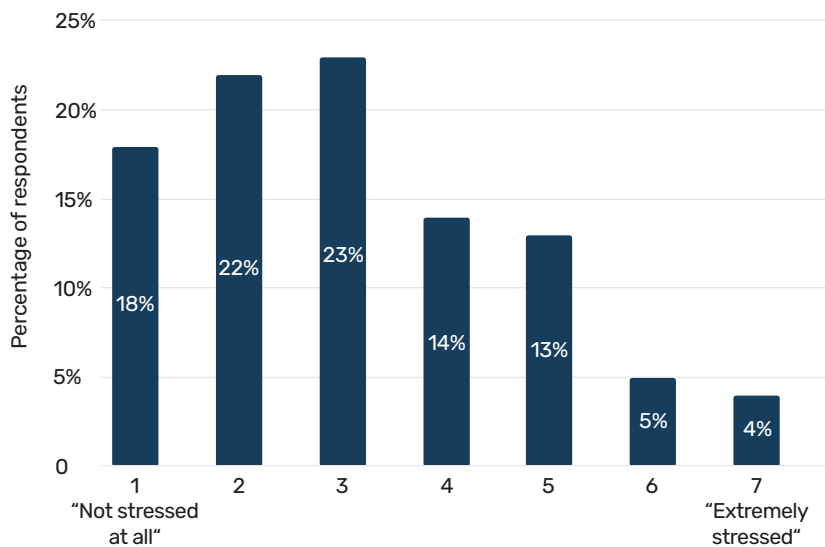
9. Have you been separated for a period of time from a family member(s) who usually live(s) in your household, due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



STRESS 2022

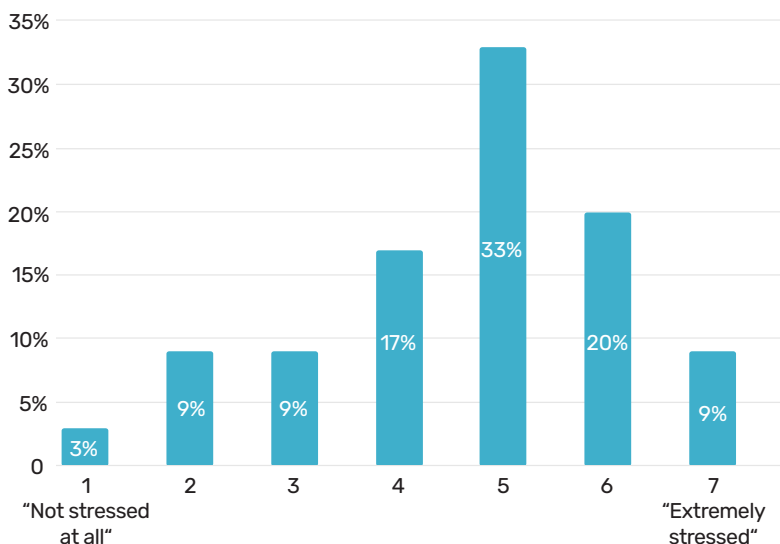
COVID-19

10. On a scale from 1-7 where 1 is “not stressed at all” and 7 is “extremely stressed”, how stressed are you currently about COVID-19?

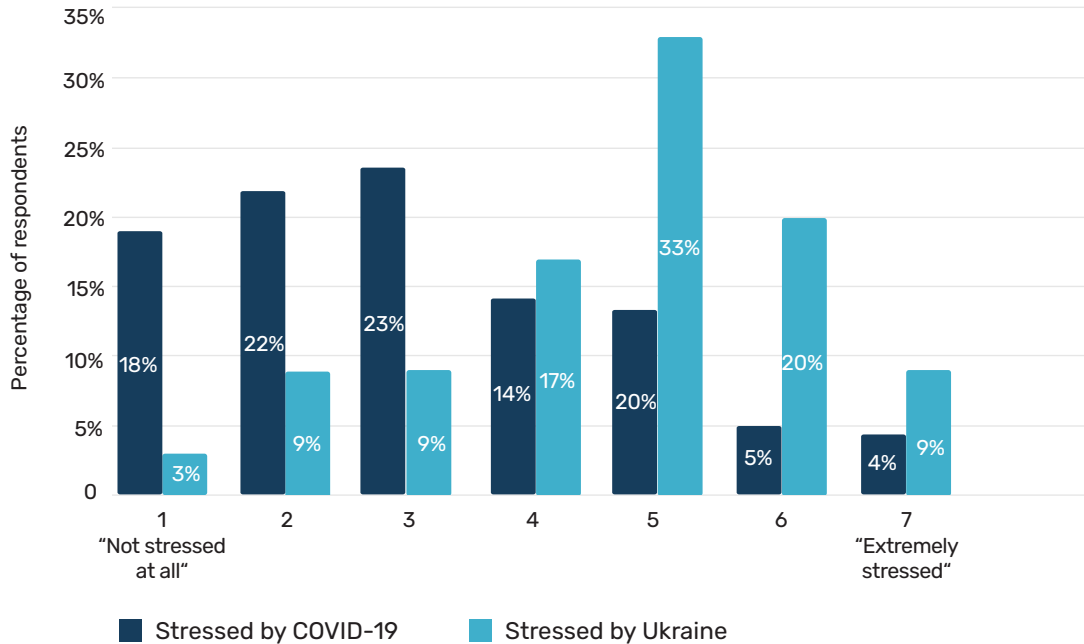


UKRAINE

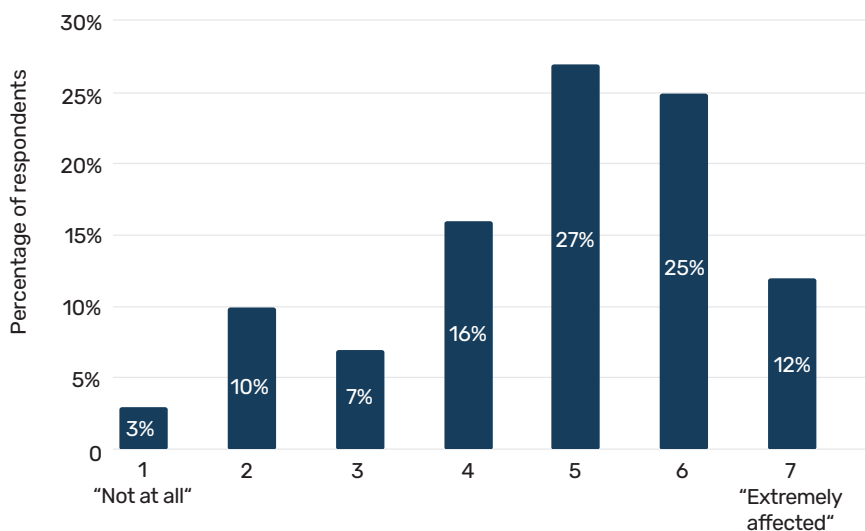
11. On a scale from 1-7 where 1 is “not stressed at all” and 7 is “extremely stressed”, how stressed are you currently about the conflict in Ukraine?



Source of stress



12. On a scale from 1-7 where 1 is "not at all", and 7 is "extremely affected", how much do you feel the current conflict in Ukraine affects you?

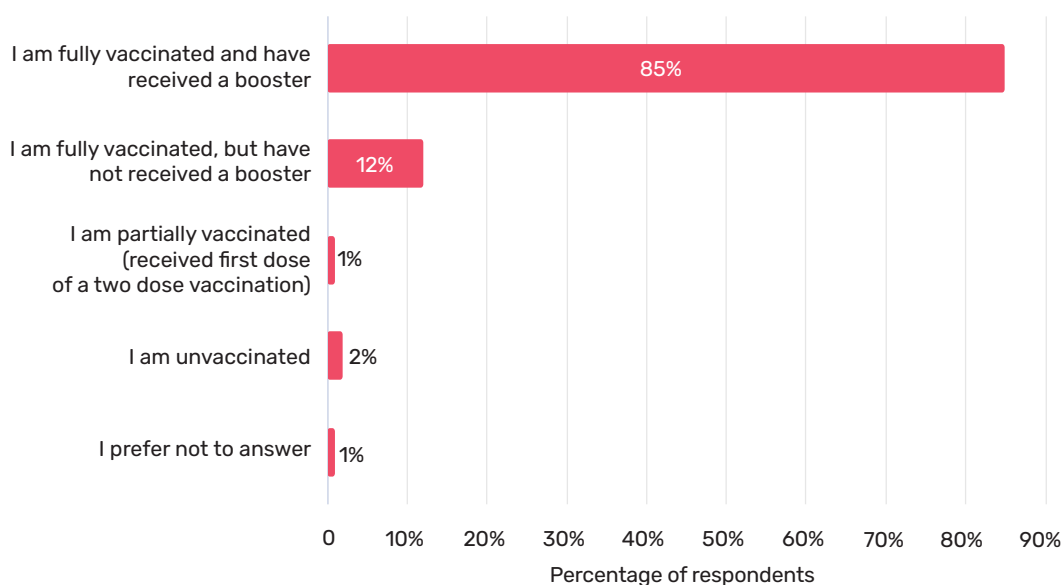


EXPOSURE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND WAR IN UKRAINE 2022

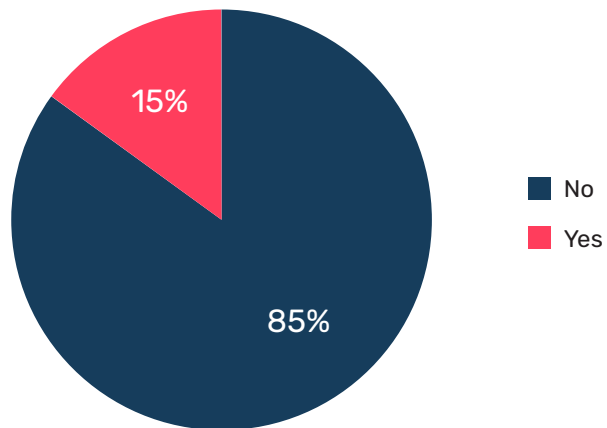
13. Exposure to COVID-19

	No	Yes	I don't know
To the best of your knowledge, have you contracted the virus that causes COVID-19?	48%	42%	10%
Have you been hospitalized because of COVID-19?	100%	0%	0%
Did any of your close friends or family die due to COVID-19?	75%	25%	1%

14. How would you describe your vaccination status?

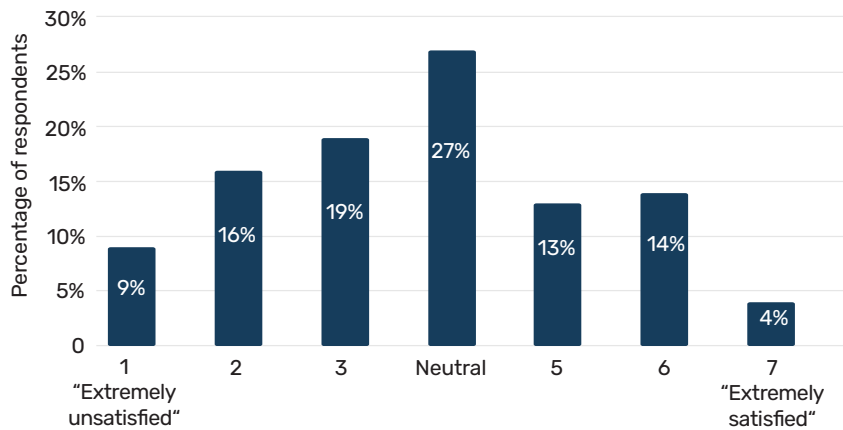


15. Do you have family or close friends in the conflict area in Ukraine?

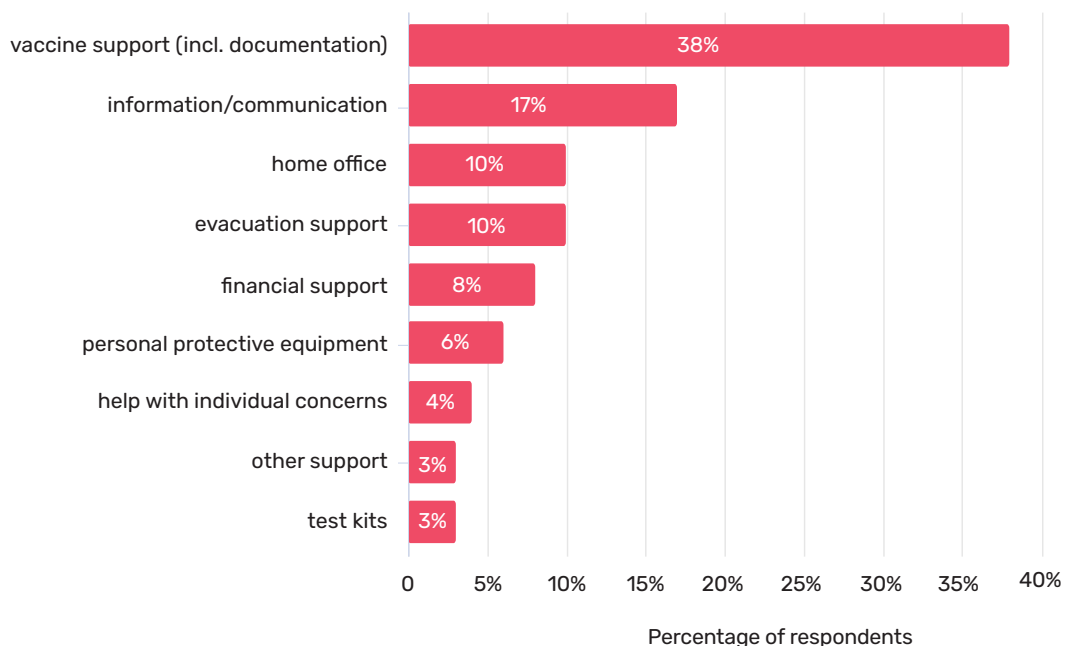


SUPPORT MEASURES 2022

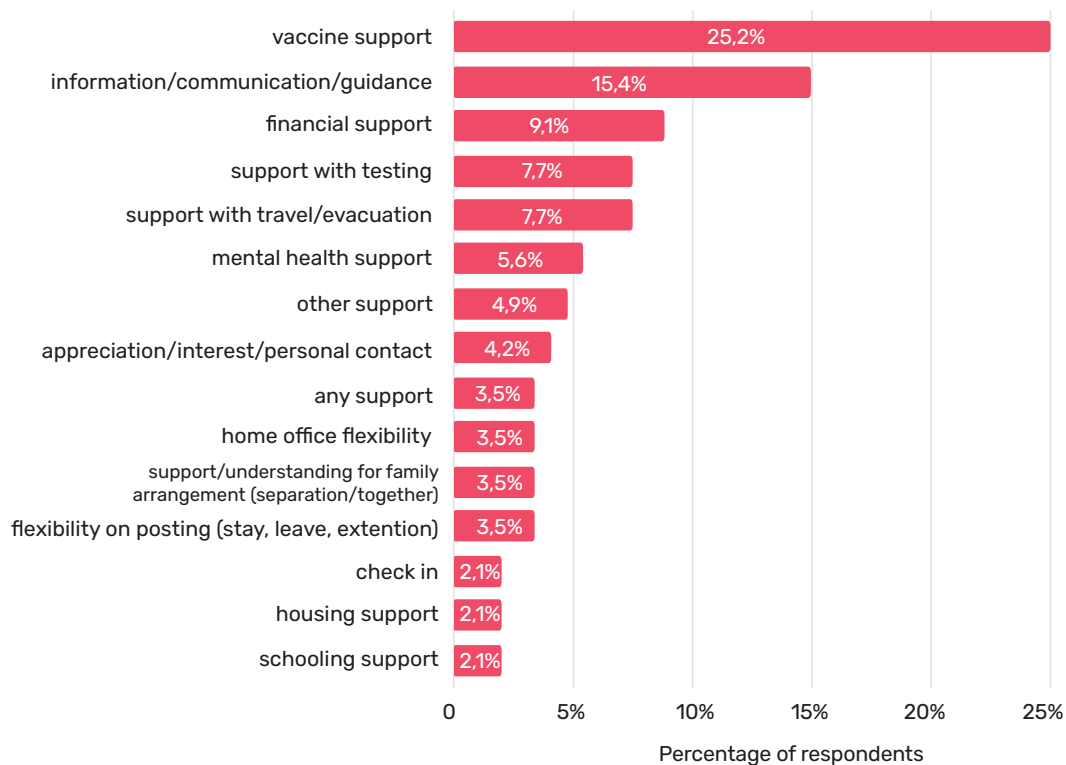
- 16. On a scale from 1-7 where 1 is “extremely unsatisfied”, 4 is “neutral” and 7 is “extremely satisfied”, how satisfied are you with your MFA’s support during the pandemic?
(Please skip the question if not applicable.)**



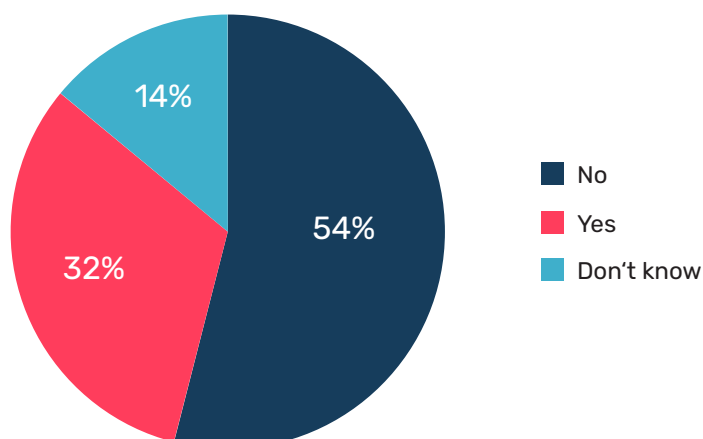
- 17. Of the COVID-related support that you received from your MFA/mission, what did you find helpful? Please comment below.
(Please skip the question if not applicable.)**



18. Is there COVID-19-related support that you did not receive from the MFA/mission, but would find helpful? Please comment below. (Please skip the question if not applicable.)



19. As a partner/spouse of an MFA officer, do you have an official direct contact person at the MFA in case of problems or questions? (in other words, a direct contact at the MFA, not through your spouse/partner)



20. What has helped you cope with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please comment below.

(Open-ended question, individual answers were categorized)

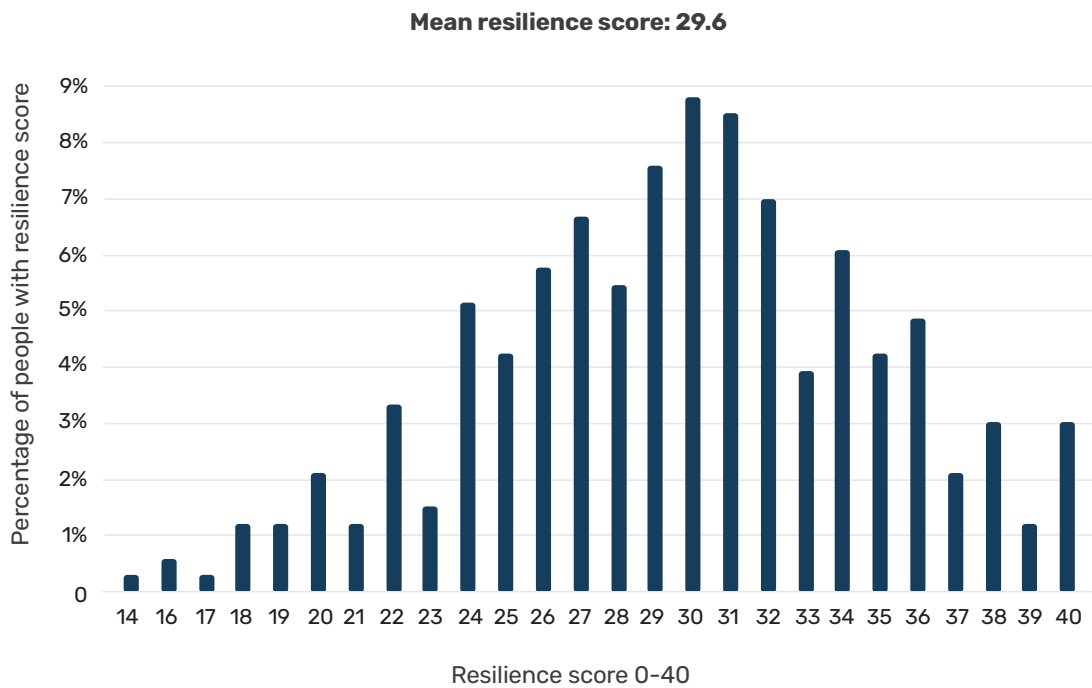
	Respondents	% of respondents
SOCIAL SUPPORT: Contact with family and friends, and supporting others	154	51%
KEEPING BUSY with meaningful/enjoyable activities (work, hobbies, volunteering...)	58	19,2%
EXERCISE/SPORT	54	17,9%
NATURE: Going on walks, gardening	40	13,2%
MINDFULNESS: Relaxation techniques / yoga / acceptance	17	5,6%
INFORMATION: Knowing and being able to follow guidelines	16	5,3%
ATTITUDE: "Keep calm and carry on": be positive, keep perspective / gratitude	14	4,6%
COMFORT: Comfortable environment / comfort food	13	4,3%
BEHAVIOR: Keep a routine / self care / be rational / make a plan	11	3,6%
WALKING THE DOG / pets	10	3,3%
VACCINATION	7	2,3%
THERAPY: Psychological support, incl. medication	7	2,3%
TRUST in medicine/doctors, local government/health system, or MFA	6	2,0%
RESTRICTING NEWS and social media	4	1,3%
RELIGIOUS FAITH	4	1,3%
TRAINING or previous crisis experience	3	1,0%
<i>no stress</i>	10	3,3%

Responses total more than 100% as respondents could indicate multiple answers.

RESILIENCE 2022

21. Resilience score (CD-RISC 10)

Resilience was measured with the 10-item Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-RISC 10). For each participant the scores from the 10 questions (not shown) are added, resulting in a total resilience score for each respondent between 0 (minimal resilience) 40 (high resilience).



BURNOUT 2022

Personal burnout was assessed with the personal burnout subscale from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory.

22. Personal burnout score (CBI)

