

# Preliminary Findings: Impact of the Dismantling of USAID on Aid Sector Employees & Families

Jaime Michelle Oberlander | University of Michigan School of Social Work | [jmeo@umich.edu](mailto:jmeo@umich.edu)



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS

With a stop work order issued on January 28, 2025, the Trump administration halted USAID overnight – effectively shutting 64 years of American investment in global health, economic development, and democratic governance across more than 100 countries. In the following months, the United States cancelled over 80% of its development and humanitarian programs, imploding the global aid sector. The dismantling that followed had a severe impact on the professional, financial, and physical and mental health of the aid workforce. Between March 27 and April 26, 2026, 3,771 former aid sector employees completed a survey assessing their well-being in the 14 months since the stop work order went into effect. The results show:

- **The majority of former aid sector employees remain unemployed and underemployed.** Only 40% of respondents had secured full-time employment, while 31% have not found any employment (not full-time, part-time, or consulting). Of those with full-time employment, 66% were making less than their previous base salary: 45% reported making significantly less.
- **Age matters.** Younger workers are more likely to be employed. Respondents under 35 had employment rates 20% higher than colleagues ages 46-55 and nearly double those ages 56-65.
- **Race is a stronger predictor of re-employment than sex.** Women report slightly higher rates of full-time employment than men (41% vs. 38%). African-American former aid workers have the lowest levels of full-time employment of any group: 28% compared to 42% of white, 45% of Asian-American, 42% of Hispanics/Latinx, and 36% of Middle Eastern/North African employees. Foreign national employees who worked for USAID in their home countries also had a low employment rate: 33%.
- **Aid sector workers & family members suffered stress-related health impacts.** 78% of respondents experienced mental health distress: 20% were diagnosed with a mental health condition and 81% of respondents reported stress-related physical symptoms.
- **Moral injury & values violations pervade.** Over 80% of respondents reported extremely high scores of moral injury: 89% respondents strongly felt that what happened violated their deeply-held moral and professional values and 83% of respondents felt a strong sense of betrayal by leaders and institutions. Respondents also reported high levels of identity disruption, anger, and job loss complicated grief.

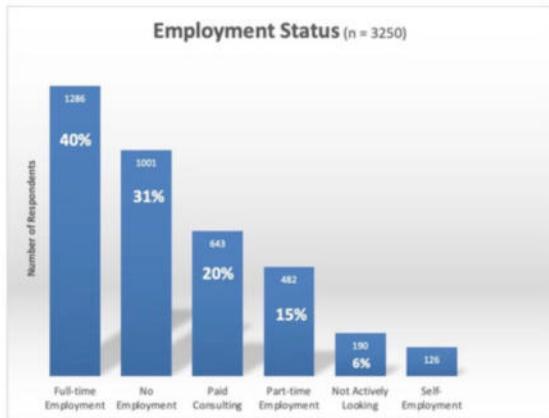
## SURVEY METHODOLOGY & BACKGROUND



This survey was conducted by the author, a former USAID Foreign Service Officer and current graduate student at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. The University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted an exemption on March 3, 2026. The survey was shared on LinkedIn and via professional associations, including OneAID. It ran from March 27 to April 26, 2026 on the Qualtrics platform, gathering 3,771 eligible responses. Response demographics include: 69% female (2,471), 30.5% male (1,094), .5% other; 61% white (2,345), 10.4% Black/African-American (398), 8.5% Hispanic/Latinx (324), 6.7% Asian-American (257), 3.5% Middle Eastern/North African (132); 2.4% preferred not to answer (90), .6% other (22); 1% under age 25 (25), 15% 26-35 years (530), 36% 36-45 years (1,276), 33% 46-55 years (1,173), 13% 56-65 years (483), 3% over 65 years (105); 55% were last employed with USAID, 27% with an implementing partner, 13% international NGOs. All participation was voluntary and anonymous. Because all questions were optional, totals vary by question; only responses with  $n > 30$  are reported.

# EMPLOYMENT

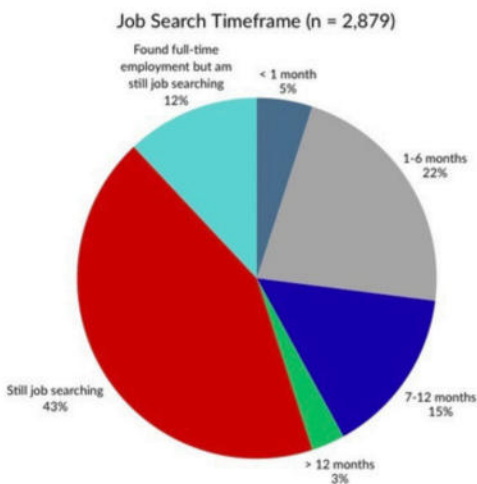
Former aid sector employees face structural barriers to re-employment: careers built around specialized graduate degrees, mastery of U.S. foreign assistance regulations, and overseas networks do not translate easily to a stagnant labor market also absorbing an 11.5% reduction in the federal workforce, reduced federal funding for domestic programs, and the loss of 29,000 nonprofit jobs nationally.



In the 15 months following the stop work order, **only 40% of former aid sector employees had secured full-time employment. Nearly one-third (31%) had found no employment at all.** The remaining respondents had cobbled together paid consulting (20%), part-time work (15%), had started their own businesses (4%) or were not actively job searching (6%).

**Job searches have been lengthy: 43% of respondents are still searching for full-time employment and 12% are searching again despite having found a role, fearing further cuts or seeking better pay.**

**Of those who did find full-time work, 67% took a pay cut – 45% of whom saw salaries drop by more than 25%. Just 17% landed positions at comparable pay.**



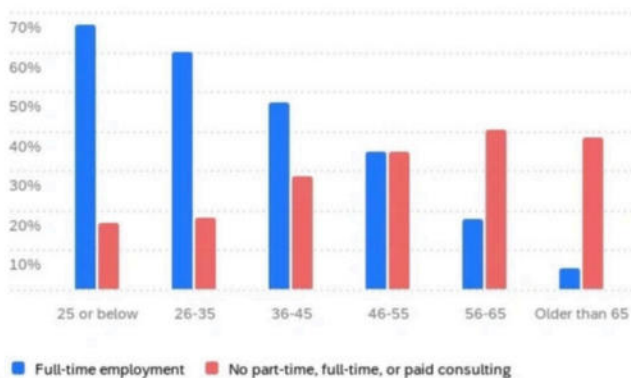
# FOREIGN SERVICE NATIONALS

Foreign nationals who worked for USAID in their home countries face bleak employment prospects in countries with high levels of unemployment and low levels of economic growth. Of the 267 USAID Foreign Service National (FSN) respondents, only 33% had secured full-time employment with 61% of these reporting making significantly less (>25% less). For many former FSNs, the reputational damage associated with USAID's closure compounded an already difficult job search – particularly in countries with strained relations with the United States or where association with a U.S government agency carries political or social risk.

*"The hardest part is starting all over – especially in a country where there are no jobs." - FSN*  
*"In Georgia, we were blamed (for) being the Deep State and funding revolution. As if we were doing something bad while really doing our best to improve our country." - FSN*

# EMPLOYMENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Employment & Age 3,250

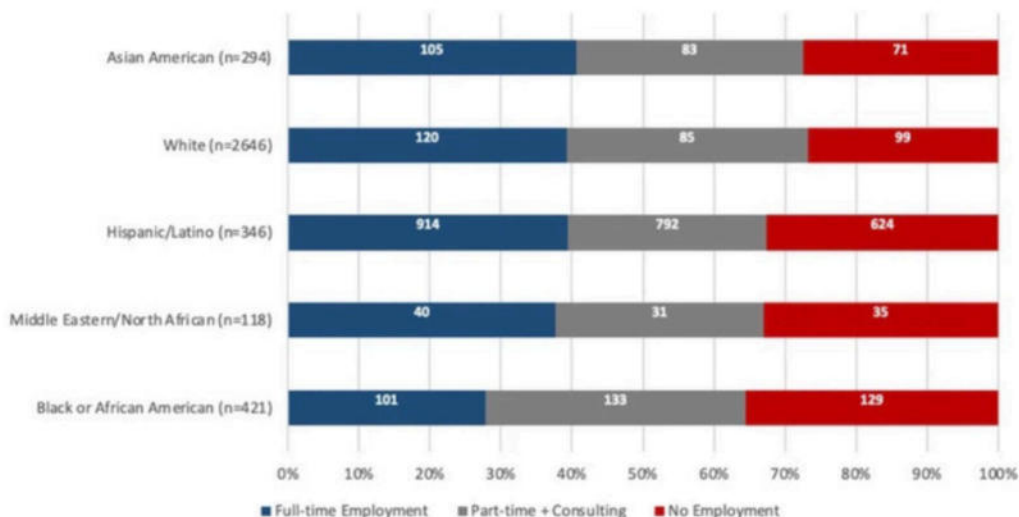


For former aid sector employees, **the likelihood of full-time employment decreases with age**. Sixty percent of respondents between 26-35 had full-time employment compared to 47% of those 36-45, 35% of those 46-55, 18% of those 56-65 and 5% of those over 65.

More senior aid workers face a structural disadvantage: decades of specialized expertise in U.S. government regulations and overseas program management do not easily transfer, while mid-career workers describe being "too young for retirement, yet too old to compete" in a saturated job market. While many younger aid workers described the strain of repaying graduate student loans to qualify for work in a diminished sector, their position in the labor market is different with more time to redirect their careers, fewer seniority based expectations, and greater access to entry- and mid-level roles across adjacent fields.

*"We are too young for retirement, yet too old to be competitive in a saturated job market despite the fact that we each hold two masters degrees and multiple professional licenses. It feels like we may never have careers again, and I am only 52."*

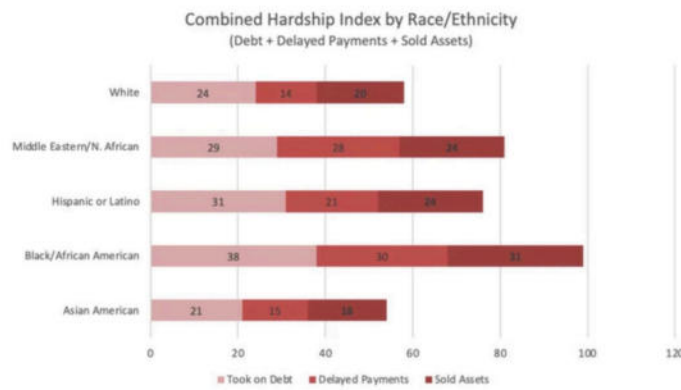
Employment by Race/Ethnic Group (n = 3,825)



Race was a stronger predictor of re employment than sex. Females have a slightly higher rate of full-time employment than males (41% vs 38%). **African-American former aid workers had the lowest rate of full-time re-employment (28%)** compared to 41% of Hispanic/Latinx employees, 42% for white employees, and 44% of Asian-American and 38% of Middle Eastern/North African employees. **African-American female aid workers had the highest rate of no employment whatsoever (41%)**. This reflects similar trends in the broader labor market with African-Americans having over double the rate of unemployment than white Americans (7.7% compared to 3.7%).

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

**Financial coping measures were widespread, and in many cases, severe.** Most respondents reduced spending significantly (81%), drew down more savings than planned (81%), and halted retirement contributions (59%). **Nearly half applied for unemployment insurance.** Others were forced to make serious trade-offs: 35% reported delaying medical care and 18% reported that family members made significant adjustments (finding employment, changing schools, etc.). More serious measures included taking on debt (26%), selling assets, including homes (22%), delaying mortgage or other major payments (17%), and applying for government assistance such as SNAP or Medicaid (14%).



When examining financial strain by race and ethnicity, **African-American former aid workers were forced to take more severe coping measures – debt, delaying major payments, liquidating assets – at a much higher rate.** Asian-American (40%) and white respondents (40%) applied for unemployment insurance at higher rates than Black/African-American respondents (24%).

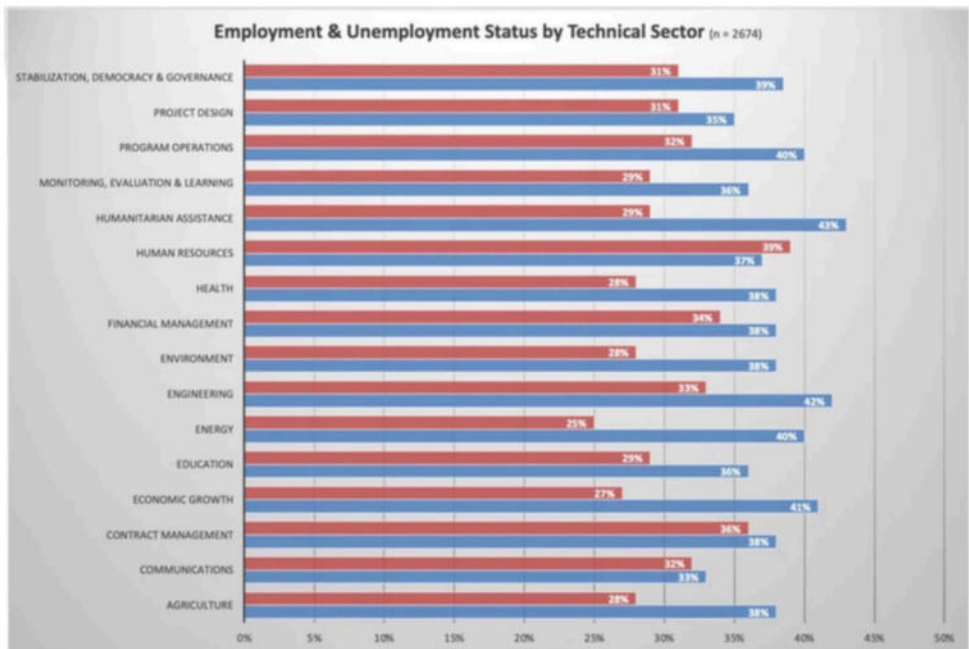
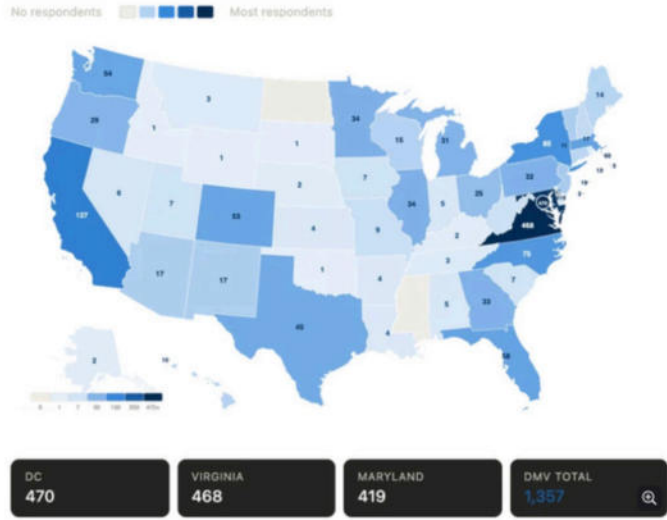
**The dismantling of USAID disrupted not only employment, but also housing and household stability.** Thirteen percent of respondents reported either moving to reduce costs or moving in with friends or family on a temporary or long-term basis. Of those posted overseas in January 2025, only 12% were able to remain in their housing. **Twenty percent of households experienced dual job loss;** for USAID Foreign Service Officers, that figure rose to 48%. This suggests that many families experienced a disproportionate household-level financial shock, not only the loss of one career. Taken together, these responses point to a workforce facing not just temporary income disruption, but cascading financial stress across savings, health care, housing, retirement security, and family stability.

20%  
of households  
experienced  
dual career loss

***“Both my husband and I worked for USAID. We both lost our jobs, which put incredibly financial and mental strain on our family. We have two children and found ourselves living temporarily from house to house as we tried to chart a new path. The extreme level of uncertainty caused tremendous stress such that I lost over 15 lbs and my husband suffered from depression and insomnia. Losing two incomes in a family at the same time was devastating and traumatic.”***

# COMMUNITY & SECTORAL IMPACT

While **57% of respondents are currently in the greater DC metropolitan area (DMV)**, others – particularly those forced to return from overseas – have relocated throughout the United States. Of states with a minimum of 30 respondents, **Oregon had the highest full-time employment rate of former aid sector employees at 56%** (n = 32). **Within the DMV area, re-employment is more modest: 34-38%** with more jobs in adjacent sectors but also more competition in the metropolitan region with the highest unemployment rate in the country, 6.7% – approximately 1.5 times greater than the national average.



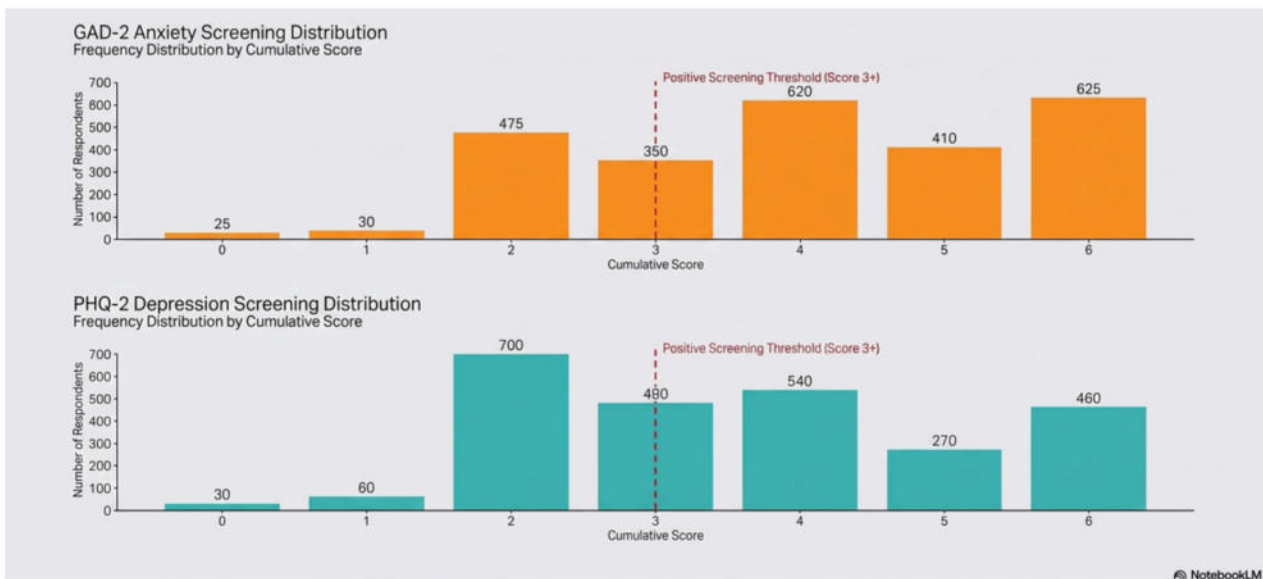
**While full-time employment rates in all technical sectors below 50%, those whose previous job functions were more technical and translatable to domestic sectors generally had higher rates of re-employment.** Engineering, Humanitarian Assistance, Economic Growth, Program Operations, and Stabilization, Democracy, and Governance had the highest rates of full-time employment; Human Resources, Contract Management, and Financial Management had the highest rates of unemployment. Among USAID Foreign Service Officers (n = 574), over 60% of Engineers (63%) and Economists (67%) had full-time employment, those in Senior Executive positions had the lowest rate of full-time employment (17%), correlating with earlier findings about age and experience working against former aid sector employees. General Development Officers, those in positions that were more general in nature also had low full-time employment rates (31%).

# PERSONAL IMPACTS

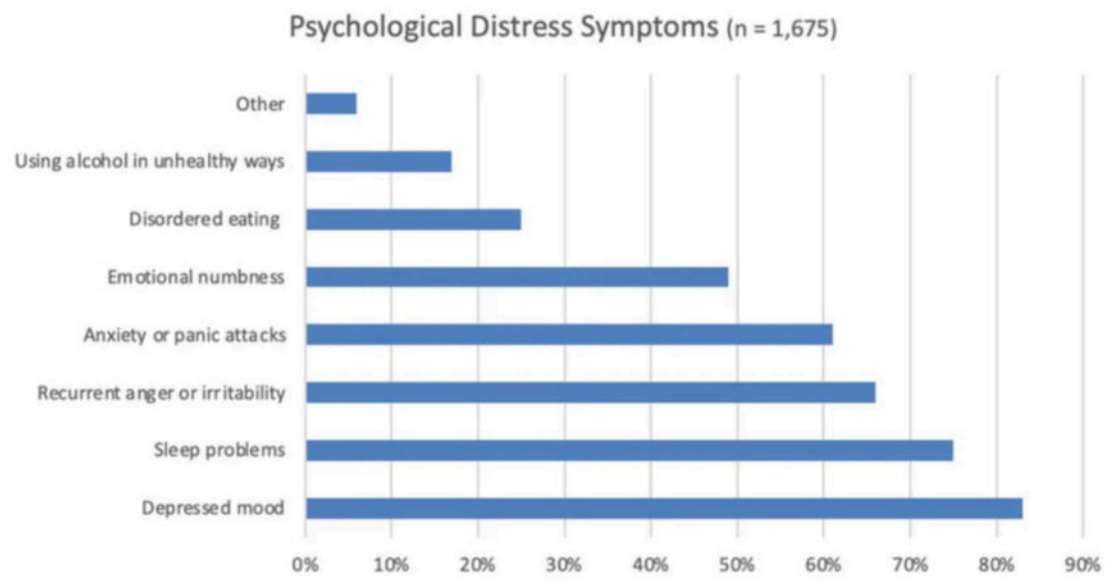
Research indicates that the longer one is unemployed, the risk of depression increases. Longer periods of joblessness also lead to feelings of powerlessness that decrease motivation for job searching, which reduces the likelihood of successfully finding employment.

The closure of USAID did not just disrupt careers. For thousands of respondents, this action triggered mental health concerns. Within 12 months following the stop-work order, 78% of respondents experienced mental health distress, 20% of whom received a diagnosis for a mental health condition, most commonly anxiety (65%) and depression (62%). Of those without a formal diagnosis, 74% still reported significant symptoms including depressed mood (83%), sleep disturbances (75%), anxiety or panic attacks (61%), and disordered eating (25%). Standardized mental health screening scores (Generalized Anxiety Disorder GAD-2 and Public Health Questionnaire PHQ-2) placed 79% of respondents above the clinical threshold for anxiety and 69% for depression.

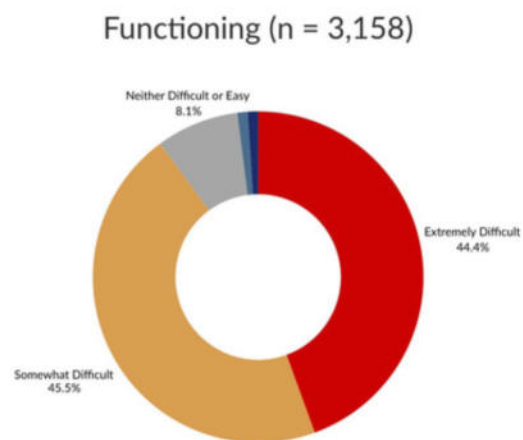
## Mental Health Screening Score Distribution: GAD-2 & PHQ-2 Analysis



Physical health was also impacted. Chronic stress – the kind that is severe, prolonged, or feels unmanageable – affects every system in the body, contributing to high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease, as well as anxiety and depression. Severe psychological distress and physical symptoms are common, with 81% of respondents experienced stress-related physical symptoms (i.e., headaches, trouble breathing, digestive issues, skin/hair, panic attacks, chest pain, gastro-intestinal issues, weight loss/gain, worsening of symptoms of an existing condition).



When asked about their ability to function in the aftermath of the USAID stop work order, 89% of respondents reported difficulty completing tasks they needed for 6 months. Over 44% of respondents reported extreme difficulty functioning (tasks were defined as paperwork, resume writing, etc.). Nearly half (45%) reported still not feeling a sense of agency – defined as having control over major life decisions, one year later. Respondents also reported a significant decrease in self-esteem following the dismantling of USAID: over 58% reported feeling less confident since losing their aid sector position.

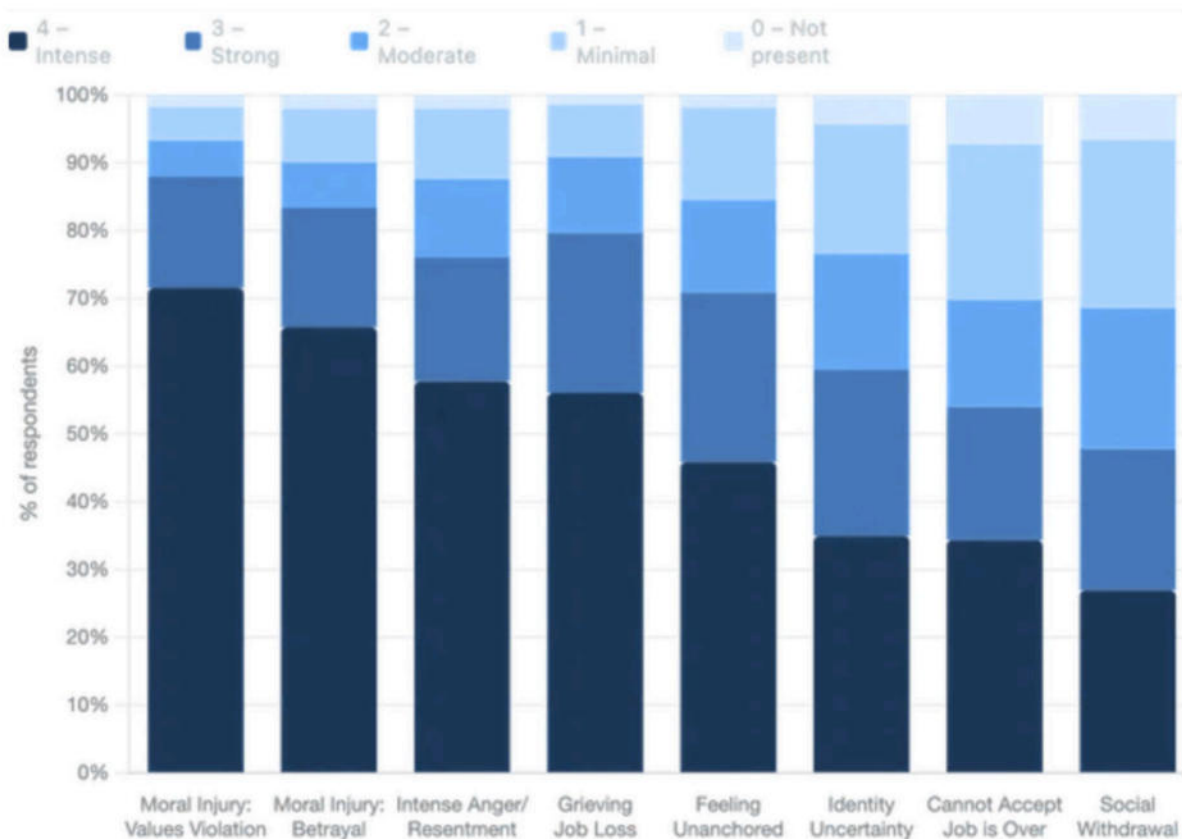


*“Even with a new role, the pay has been a fraction and the level of responsibility equivalent to an intern. Because I’m coming from an outside system, I am forced to start over again as a middle-aged person with significant experience. It’s been terrible for my self-esteem and my relationship with my family.”*

## MORAL INJURY, IDENTITY DISRUPTION, ANGER, GRIEF

The impact extended beyond employment, finances, health and mental health, into identity, values, and purpose. Over 80% of respondents reported extremely high scores of moral injury: 89% respondents strongly felt that what happened violated their deeply-held moral and professional values and 83% of respondents felt a strong sense of betrayal by leaders and institutions. For most, working for or with USAID was not simply a job but a vocation: 73% said their work was central to their identity and its loss left them feeling unanchored. Nearly four in five respondents (79%) reported strong levels of grief comparable to a significant loss, while 76% expressed intense anger about how their careers and USAID ended. Many also described grief over the abrupt termination of programs serving vulnerable populations around the world.

**Intensity Scales of Moral Injury, Identity Disruption, Anger, Job Loss Complicated Grief (0-4)**  
(n = 2,355 - 2,876)



*In terms of mental health impacts and how USAID folks are coping one year on, I wish everyone knew how resilient we are as individuals. We have lived through coups, disease outbreaks, and evacuations. We have worked our weekends and evenings with no additional compensation in unpredictable situations, and with foreign actors who did not have our best interests in mind. We have missed funerals, weddings, graduations, and births back home in order to do our jobs. We have developed incredible systems and approaches to decision making and scenario planning that has allowed us to care for our families in complicated contexts. **We are not hurting because we are not strong or resilient people. We are hurting because of the scale of the damage done and the betrayal and cruelty it represents.***

## FAMILY IMPACTS

The aid sector places unusual demands on families and relationships in normal circumstances, including repeated relocations, long separations, disrupted spouse employment, school transitions, and the strain of building and rebuilding support systems overseas. USAID's dismantling added a different kind of pressure: sudden career loss, financial uncertainty, identity disruption, and a change in household status after years of service. Dismantling USAID impacted families - not just employees - in a way other professions do not experience.

*"It has been extremely hard on my relationship with my spouse. Our financial and career situations changed drastically, and with both of us unthethered, it has been hard to get on the same page about what to do next. With neither of us working, financial stress and disagreement has increased significantly. Both of us are down, and I'm finding that my spouse is unable to provide the kind of emotional support I would like."*

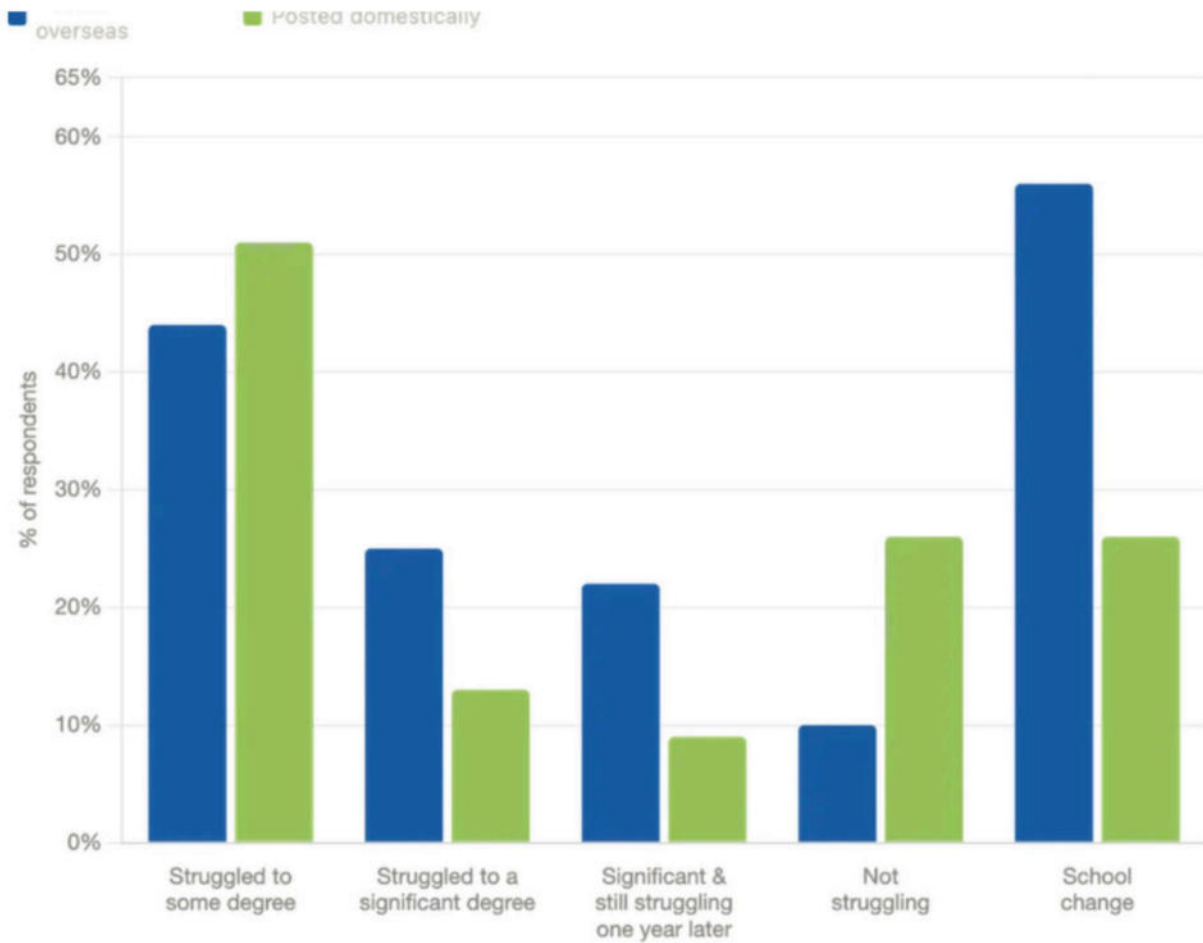
## IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

When faced with sudden job loss, the majority (89%) responded that their relationship remained intact. Still, **11% reported their relationship status changed in 2025** – 46% of whom directly attributed the relationship change to the dismantling of USAID. Additionally, **24% of all respondents reported their marriage or relationship became weaker** as a result of stress and status change associated with the dismantling of USAID.

These findings do not suggest that USAID's closure was the sole cause of family disruption in every case. They do, however, indicate that the dismantling acted as a significant stressor for a workforce already operating under family conditions more complex than those faced by most professionals.

*"My non-married partner of three years made significant compromises – leaving a stable job to move overseas, selling his condo – that later didn't see the rewards commensurate with the risk. Our relationship has not fully recovered."*

## Impact on Children: Families overseas vs. U.S.-based (n = 1.837)



Among parents, 80% reported that their children struggled: 47% to some degree; 15% to a significant degree; **18% said their children were still struggling significantly one year later.** **Children in families posted overseas fared worse on all indicators;** notably, 62% had to change schools, compared to 26% of U.S.-based families. Spouses and partners also experienced significant distress: 60% reported psychological distress symptoms, 33% reported stress-related physical symptoms, and 20% received a formal mental health diagnosis.

*The hardest part was: "The loss of identity. While this applied mostly to me as the career official, it has impacted the whole family as well. My children who are in middle and high school have particularly struggled with their worldview. They have dealt with it like the resilient youth that they are; however, underneath a confident exterior is very sad, depressed and angry interior that leaves us as parents tormented, knowing that it's like a growing cancer eating away at their souls through no fault of their own. We can only hope that in time we will all heal, but it is a challenge - one that few outside of the international development industry understand"*