



The University of Texas at San Antonio  
Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice

# Texas Law Enforcement Fitness and Wellness Survey

By:

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In September 2019, researchers from the University of Texas at San Antonio (Dr. Michael R. Smith) and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (Dr. Matthew Petrocelli) distributed an electronic survey to all Texas law enforcement agencies seeking information on their policies and procedures related to officer fitness and wellness. The overarching goal of the project was to learn more about how Texas law enforcement agencies are thinking about and responding from a policy perspective to contemporary perspectives on officer wellness. Recent research on police fitness, mental health, and overall wellness has revealed significant challenges for an occupation that regularly experiences high levels of stress, fatigue, intentional assaults, and suicide (Ortmeirer and Meese, 2010; Tanigoshi et al., 2008). Our hope is that the results from the survey will allow agencies to benchmark their own wellness policies and programs against others in the state and to consider ways, where feasible, to invest in improving the fitness, wellness, and resiliency of their officers.

## **Methods**

There are approximately 1150 law enforcement agencies in the State of Texas that range in size from a single officer to more than 5,000 sworn. We developed a survey designed to tap into a number of agency-level policy and programmatic dimensions related to officer fitness, wellness, and mental health.<sup>1</sup> After receiving approval from the UTSA Institutional Review Board, we distributed the survey via email using a Qualtrics link to all Texas law enforcement agency heads. The email and accompanying survey instructions requested the agency head (e.g. chief, sheriff, director) to complete the survey or forward it to an appropriate person in the agency who could knowledgeably provide the information we sought. After the initial survey distribution, we sent two reminder emails approximately two weeks apart and closed the survey to new responses at the end of October 2019. We received 238 valid responses for an overall response rate of 21 percent. Table 1 below summarizes the variables captured, missing data, and response percentages for each question.

As noted above, agency size varied from 1 to 5,258 sworn officers. The mean number of sworn officers across responding agencies was 101 and the median was 20. Across all survey questions, there was only a moderate amount of missing data. Missing data percentages ranged from 0 for many questions to 32.3% for a single question. More commonly, the percentage of data missing from questions ranged from 10-16%. While we do not claim these data represent all Texas law enforcement agencies, they do provide a fairly robust snapshot of agency policies, procedures, and programs related to officer fitness and wellness. To our knowledge, they are the only data of this type available for the State of Texas.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey consisted of 42 questions and is available for review in Appendix A of this report.

**TABLE 1: Variable Frequencies and Missing Data**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent Missing</b>	<b>Valid N*</b>	<b>Percent**</b>
<b>Agency Type</b>	238	0%	238	--
<i>Municipal/town</i>	--	--	172	72.3%
<i>State LE agency</i>	--	--	9	3.8%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	57	23.9%
<b>Fitness Trainer Available</b>	238	0%	238	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	23	9.7%
<i>No</i>	--	--	215	90.3%
<b><i>Out-of-pocket expense</i></b>	23	0%	23	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	1	4.3%
<i>No</i>	--	--	22	95.7%
<b>Pre-Emp. Fitness Test</b>	238	1.7%	234	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	113	48.3%
<i>No</i>	--	--	121	51.7%
<b><i>Elements</i></b>	113	0%	113	--
<i>Push-ups</i>	--	--	46	19.6%
<i>Sit-ups</i>	--	--	45	19.2%
<i>Pull-ups/flexed arm hang</i>	--	--	2	.8%
<i>Timed run</i>	--	--	62	26.5%
<i>Dummy carry/drag</i>	--	--	34	14.5%
<i>Scale wall</i>	--	--	27	11.5%
<i>Vertical jump</i>	--	--	13	5.5%
<i>Obstacle course</i>	--	--	30	12.8%
<i>Hand/grip strength</i>	--	--	10	4.3%
<i>Flexibility</i>	--	--	14	6.0%
<i>Height/weight</i>	--	--	17	7.3%
<i>Body fat/BMI</i>	--	--	9	3.8%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	48	20.5%
<b>Pre-Emp. Fit Standards Vary By</b>	234	1.7%	234	--
<i>Gender</i>	--	--	46	19.7%
<i>Age</i>	--	--	44	18.8%
<i>Disability</i>	--	--	4	17.1%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	15	6.4%
<i>No variance</i>	--	--	61	26.1%
<b>Length Basic Academy (weeks)</b>	238	11.3%	211	--
<i>6-10</i>	--	--	16	7.6%
<i>11-16</i>	--	--	32	15.2%
<i>17-23</i>	--	--	69	32.7%
<i>24-30</i>	--	--	67	31.8%
<i>&gt;30</i>	--	--	27	12.8%
<b>Acad. Fit Training Mandatory</b>	238	9.7%	215	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	175	81.4%
<i>No</i>	--	--	40	18.6%
<b><i>Hours per week</i></b>	238	30.3%	166	--
<i>1-3</i>	--	--	55	33.1%
<i>4-6</i>	--	--	85	51.2%
<i>7-10</i>	--	--	19	11.4%
<i>&gt;10</i>	--	--	7	4.2%

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent Missing</b>	<b>Valid N*</b>	<b>Percent**</b>
<b>Fit Test for Acad. Graduation</b>	238	14.7%	203	
None	--	--	76	37.4%
Push-ups	--	--	91	44.8%
Sit-ups	--	--	91	44.8%
Pull-ups	--	--	28	13.8%
Timed run	--	--	92	45.3%
Dummy carry/drag	--	--	30	14.8%
Scale wall	--	--	25	12.3%
Vertical jump	--	--	20	9.9%
Obstacle course	--	--	35	17.2%
Hand/grip strength	--	--	9	4.4%
Flexibility	--	--	20	9.9%
Height/weight	--	--	32	15.8%
Body fat/BMI	--	--	24	11.8%
Other	--	--	28	13.8%
<b>Acad. Fit Standards Vary By</b>	203	0%	203	
Gender	--	--	45	22%
Age	--	--	40	19.7%
Disability	--	--	9	4.4%
Other	--	--	11	5.4%
No variance	--	--	51	25.1%
<b>Fit Test for In-Service Officers</b>	238	11.8%	212	
Yes	--	--	68	32.4%
No	--	--	142	67.6%
<b>In-Service Fit Test</b>	68	0%	68	--
Mandatory	--	--	46	67.7%
Voluntary	--	--	22	32.3%
<b>Mandatory Fit Standards Vary By</b>	68	32.3%	46	
Assignment	--	--	2	4.3%
Rank	--	--	3	6.5%
Officer disability	--	--	14	30.4%
No variance	--	--	27	58.7%
<b>Reasons for No In-Service Fitness Test</b>	142	0%	142	
Not a priority of agency head	--	--	23	16.2%
Lawsuit/litigation concerns	--	--	36	25.4%
Labor/union concerns	--	--	23	16.2%
Cost	--	--	56	39.4%
Other	--	--	52	36.7%
<b>Frequency of In-Service Fit Tests</b>	69	0%	69	
Twice per year	--	--	25	36.2%
Annually	--	--	34	49.3%
Other	--	--	10	14.5%

	N	Percent Missing	Valid N*	Percent**
<b>In-Service Fit Test Elements</b>	68	0%	68	
<i>Push-ups</i>	--	--	29	42.7%
<i>Sit-ups</i>	--	--	26	38.2%
<i>Pull-ups</i>	--	--	5	7.1%
<i>Timed run</i>	--	--	32	47.1%
<i>Dummy carry/drag</i>	--	--	8	11.8%
<i>Scale wall</i>	--	--	5	7.4%
<i>Vertical jump</i>	--	--	6	8.8%
<i>Obstacle course</i>	--	--	7	10.3%
<i>Hand/grip strength</i>	--	--	2	2.9%
<i>Flexibility</i>	--	--	8	11.8%
<i>Height/weight</i>	--	--	10	14.7%
<i>Body fat/BMI</i>	--	--	6	8.8%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	46	67.7%
<b>In-Service Fit Standards Vary By</b>	68	0%	68	
<i>Gender</i>	--	--	40	58.8%
<i>Age</i>	--	--	35	51.5%
<i>Disability</i>	--	--	2	2.9%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	15	22%
<i>No variance</i>			25	36.8%
<b>Outside Consult. Used for Dev. of Fit Policies/Standards</b>	68	0%	68	
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	43	63.2%
<i>No</i>	--	--	25	36.8%
<b>Incentives for Passage of Fit Test</b>	68	0%	68	
<i>Vacation/comp time</i>	--	--	31	45.6%
<i>Salary incentive</i>	--	--	9	13.2%
<i>Gym membership/reimburse</i>	--	--	6	8.8%
<i>Time on-duty to exercise</i>	--	--	22	32.4%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	6	8.8%
<b>Penalties for Fit Test Failure</b>	68	0%	68	
<i>Nutrition counseling</i>	--	--	11	16.2%
<i>Exercise program</i>	--	--	14	20.6%
<i>Transfers/promotions prohibited</i>	--	--	16	23.5%
<i>Suspension/demotion</i>	--	--	4	5.9%
<i>Termination</i>	--	--	9	13.2%
<i>Other</i>	--	--	16	23.5%
<b>Employee Assist. Program</b>	238	12.6%	208	
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	164	78.8%
<i>No</i>	--	--	44	18.5%
<b>Out-of-pocket expense</b>	164	0%	164	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	13	7.9%
<i>No/unsure</i>	--	--	151	92.1%

	N	Percent Missing	Valid N*	Percent**
<b>Dept.-Supplied Psychologist</b>	238	13.0%	207	--
<i>No</i>	--	--	74	35.7%
<i>Full-time</i>	--	--	10	4.8%
<i>Contract/as-needed basis</i>	--	--	123	59.4%
<b><i>Out-of-pocket expense</i></b>	238	16%	200	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	67	33.5%
<i>No</i>	--	--	133	66.5%
<b>Dept.-Supplied Nutritionist</b>	238	13%	207	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	14	6.8%
<i>No</i>	--	--	193	93.2%
<b><i>Out-of-pocket expense</i></b>	238	29%	169	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	135	79.9%
<i>No</i>	--	--	34	20.1%
<b>Traumatic Incident Policy/Procedure</b>	238	16.8%	198	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	131	66.2%
<i>No</i>	--	--	67	33.8%
<b><i>Debriefing/counseling available</i></b>	238	16.4%	199	--
<i>No</i>	--	--	18	9.0%
<i>Mandatory</i>	--	--	74	37.2%
<i>Optional</i>	--	--	107	53.8%
<b>Officer-Involved Shooting Mental Health Policy/Proc.</b>	238	16.8%	198	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	150	75.8%
<i>No</i>	--	--	48	24.2%
<b><i>Debriefing/counseling available</i></b>	238	16.8%	198	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	167	84.3%
<i>No</i>	--	--	31	15.7%
<b>Dept.-Supplied Chaplain</b>	238	15.5%	201	--
<i>Yes</i>	--	--	107	53.2%
<i>No</i>	--	--	94	46.8%
<b><i>Chaplain paid status</i></b>	107	0%	107	--
<i>Volunteer</i>	--	--	97	90.7%
<i>Part-time</i>	--	--	3	2.8%
<i>Full-time</i>	--	--	7	2.9%

\*Ns for sub-elements do not always add to the total valid N as categories are not always mutually exclusive.

\*\*Percentages do not always add to 100% as categories are not always mutually exclusive.

## Results

In this section we present a series of figures that reflect agency responses to selected questions on the survey. While not every survey question is represented in the figures below, the information presented in this section indicates how agencies responded to key questions on the survey. Additional information on survey responses not shown below is available from the authors upon request.

Figure 1 shows whether departments utilized a pre-employment fitness test as a condition of hire. The results are nearly split - 48% of departments reported using pre-employment fitness tests while 52% did not.

**FIGURE 1**

### PRE-EMPLOYMENT FITNESS TEST UTILIZED

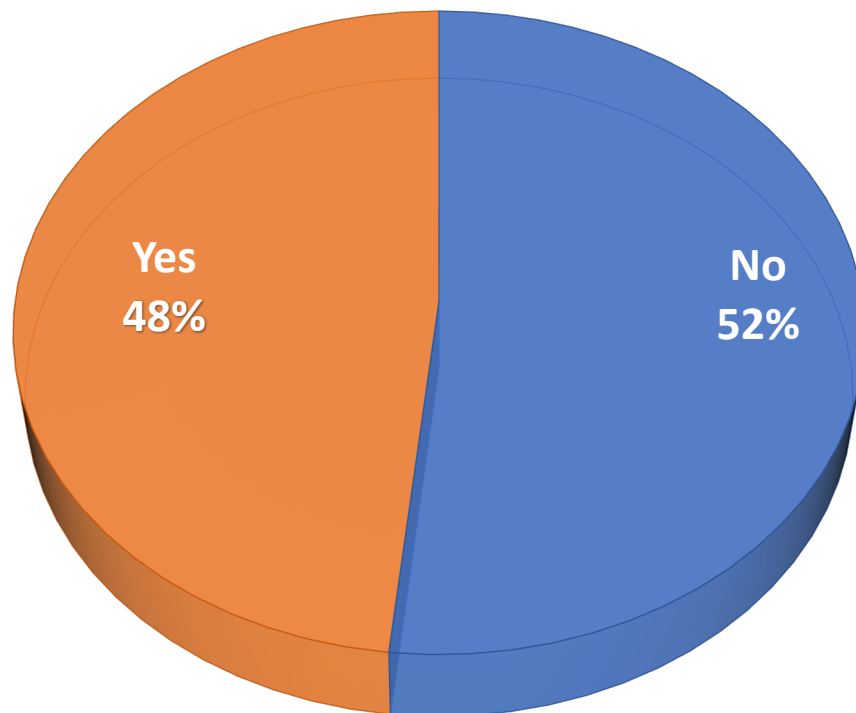


Figure 2 shows a breakdown of fitness events used by departments that mandate pre-employment fitness tests. The most often-used fitness test was a timed run (26.5%), followed closely by some “Other” type of fitness measure not named on the survey. The majority of these “Other” events were timed rowing machine tests (20.5%). Pushups (19.6%) and sit-ups (19.2%) were the next most frequently utilized pre-employment fitness measures. It is interesting to note that the most frequently used fitness events are also the most conventional measures of fitness that have been historically used to assess physical conditioning. The next most populous grouping of tests were more contemporary measures of fitness including the dummy carry/drag (14.5%), an obstacle course (12.8%) and a wall scale (11.5%) test. The least often used measures reported were height/weight of an applicant (7.3%), flexibility (6%), vertical jump (4.3%), body mass index (BMI)/body fat calculation (3.8%), and pull-ups (0.8%).

**FIGURE 2**

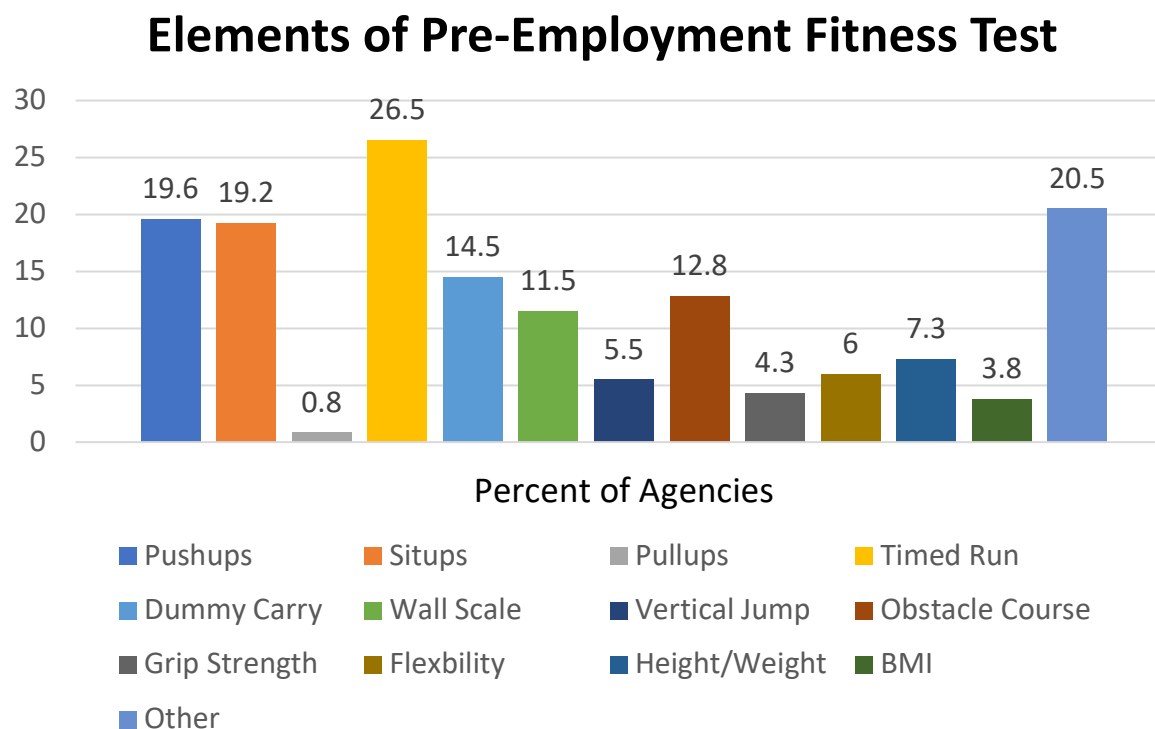




Figure 3 shows that overwhelmingly police departments in Texas (81%) mandate physical fitness training in the academy, while 19% had no such requirement.

**FIGURE 3**

### Academy Fitness Training Mandatory

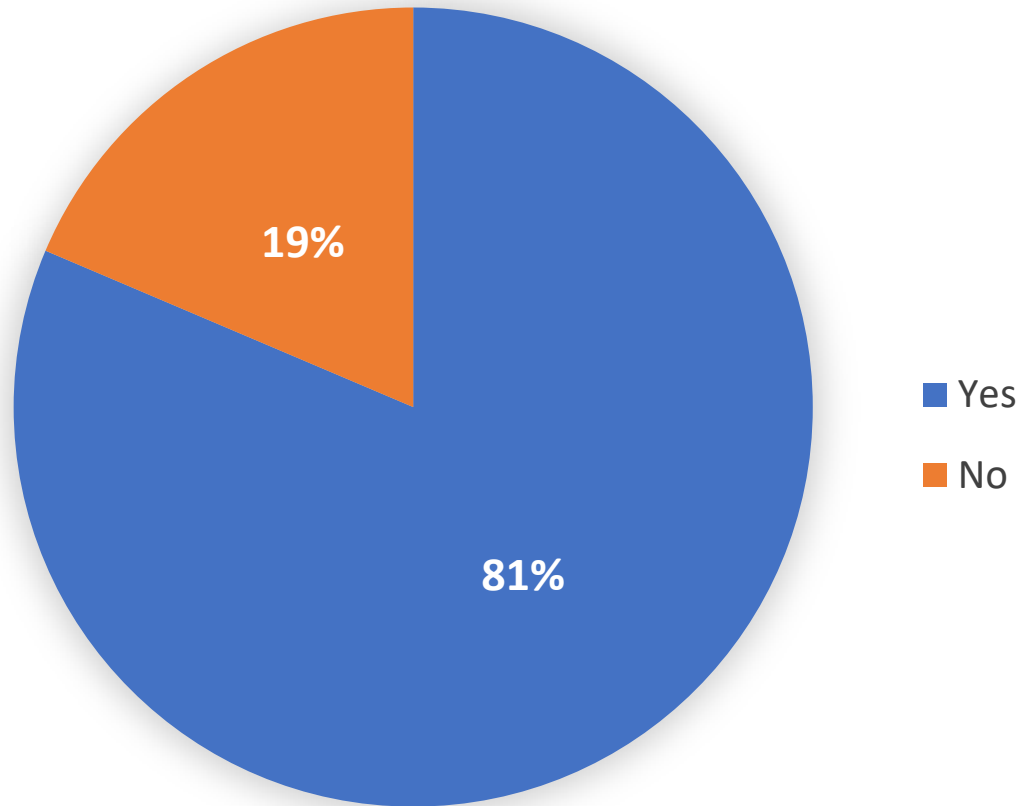


Figure 4 illustrates variation in fitness standards as a function of gender, age, disability or some other reason. The left-hand figure shows how those variables impact pre-employment fitness standards and the adjacent figure depicts variance in academy fitness standards. The results are essentially similar, with one exception: Pre-employment fitness standards varied by gender in 19.7% of agencies surveyed; similarly, 22% of agencies reported that their academy fitness standards varied by gender. Approximately, 19% of agencies reported variation in their pre-employment fitness standards or academy fitness standards by age. Pre-employment fitness standards varied for some “Other” reason among 6.4% of reporting agencies (most often by candidate weight), while academy fitness standards varied by a similar percentage (5.4%). Pre-employment fitness standards exhibited no variance 26.1% of the time; similarly, there was no academy fitness standards variation for 25.1% of reporting departments. Disability showed the greatest difference in variance, with pre-employment standards varying by 17.1% as opposed to academy fitness standards varying by 4.4%.

**FIGURE 4**

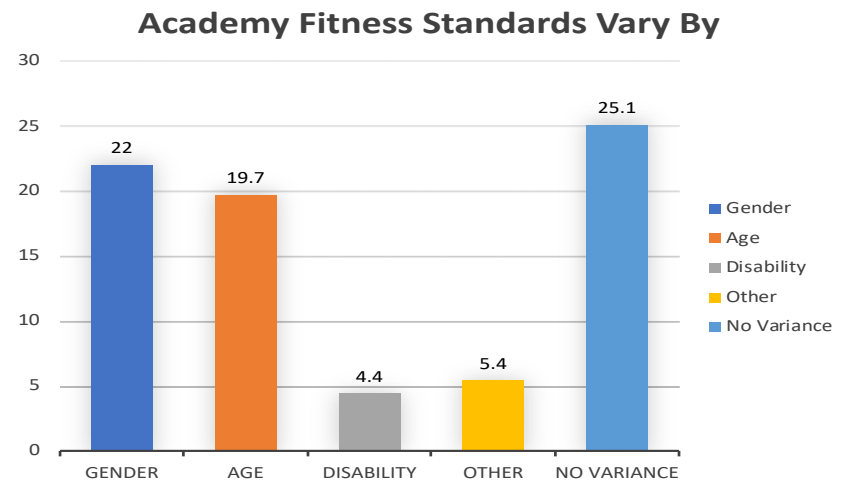
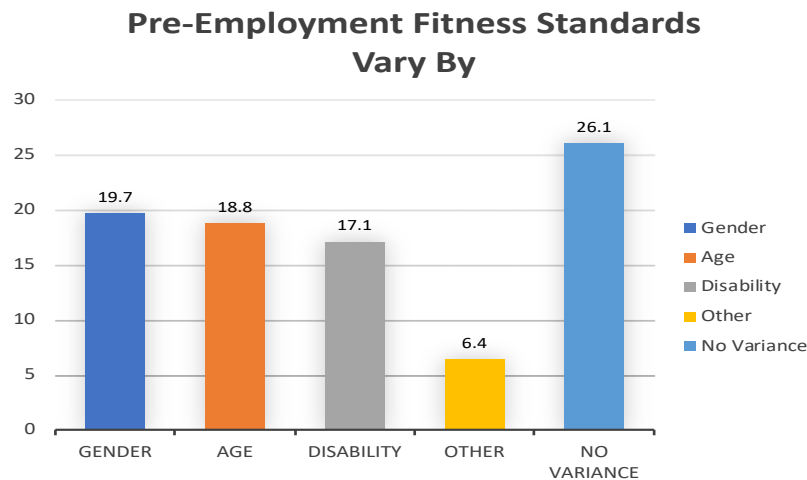
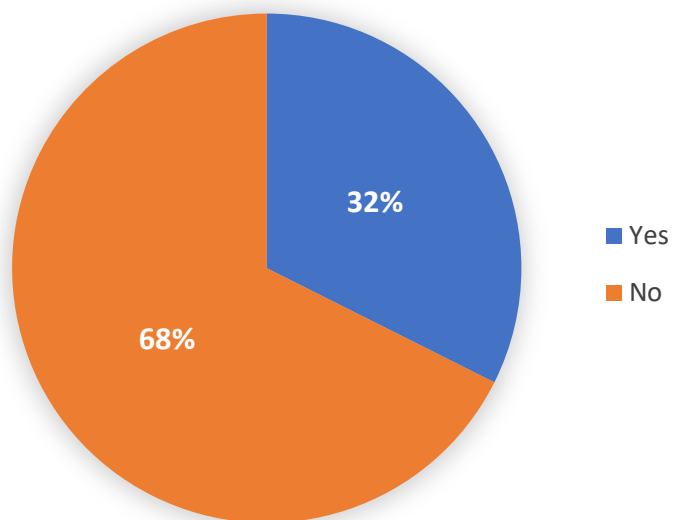


Figure 5 measures whether reporting agencies have an in-service fitness test available to officers and whether or not that test is mandatory. Sixty-eight percent of the departments did not have a fitness test a certified officer could take while 32% of departments did have some type of test. For those departments with an in-service test, the adjacent figure illustrates that officers were mandated to take that test in 68% of the cases, while 32% of the departments did not require participation.

**FIGURE 5**

**Fitness Test Required for In-Service Officers**



**In-Service Fitness Test Is**

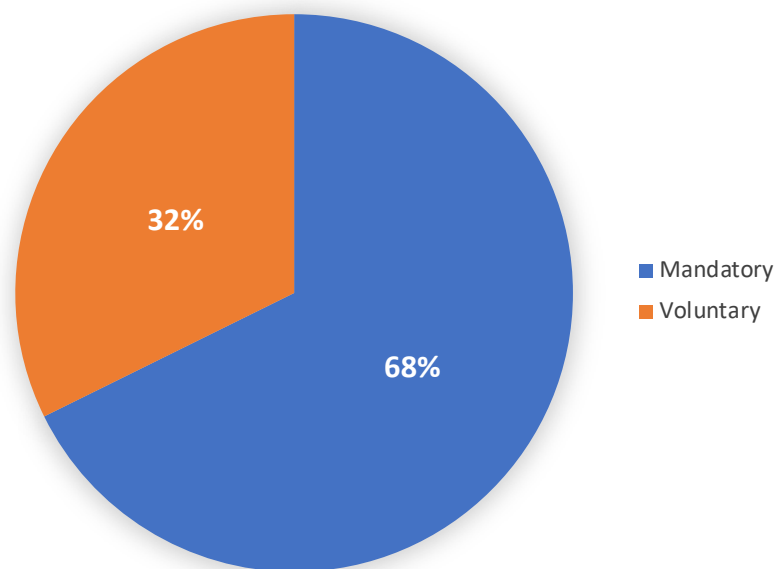


Figure 6 illustrates the prevalence of fitness events for those departments that have an in-service fitness test available. The most common in-service fitness test event was some “Other” physical assessment, most often a timed rowing test (68%). For those events listed on the survey, the most popular tests were a timed run (47.1%), pushups (42.7%) and sit-ups (38.2%). Those events were distantly followed by a height/weight assessment (14.7%), a flexibility test (11.8%), dummy drag (11.8%) and an obstacle course (10.3%). The last grouping of events which were least common included a body fat or BMI assessment (8.8%), vertical jump (8.8%), wall scale (7.4%), pull-ups (7.1%) and a grip strength test (2.9%).

**FIGURE 6**

## Elements of In-Service Fitness Test

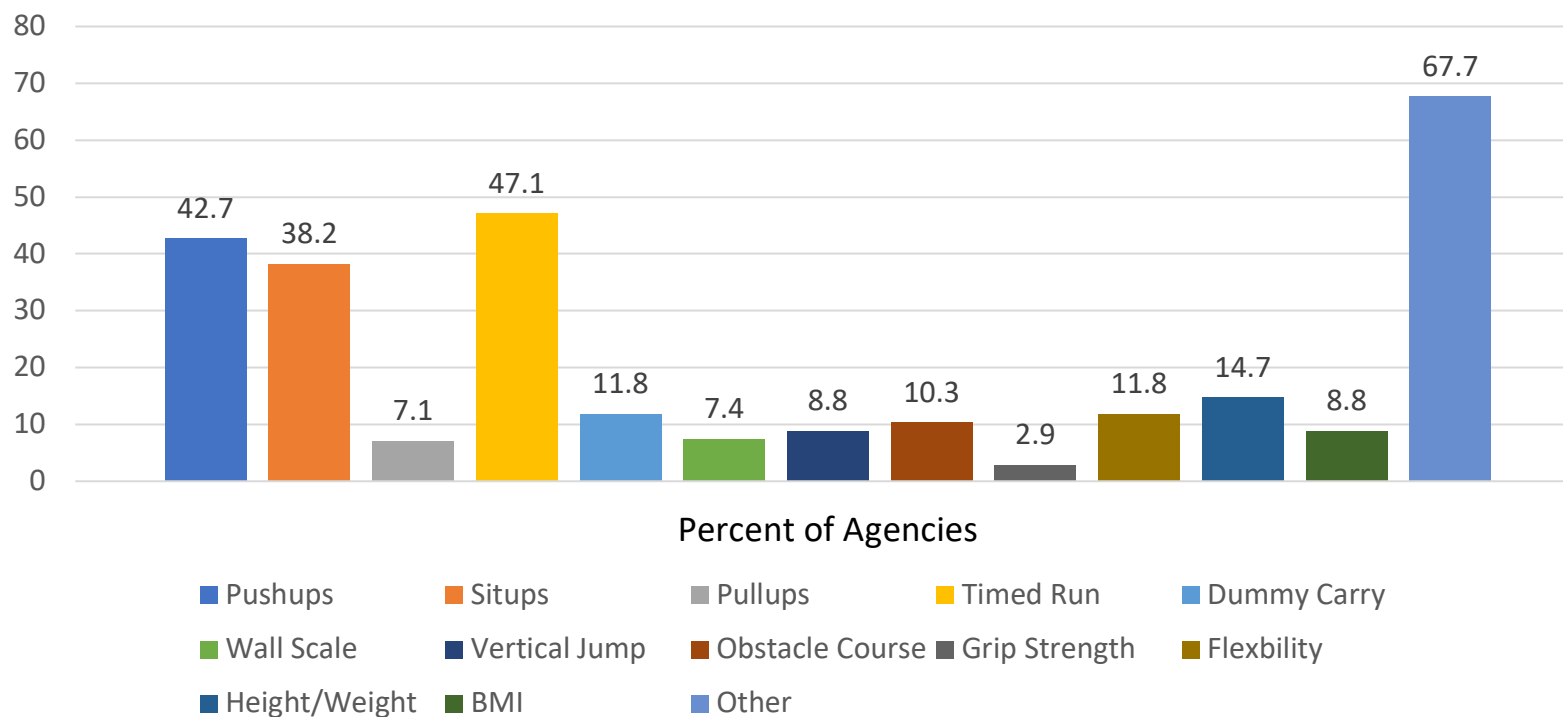


Figure 7 shows whether or not an outside fitness consultant was used by responding departments. The majority of agencies did not employ an outside fitness consultant (63%) while 37% of agencies utilized one.

**FIGURE 7**

### **OUTSIDE FITNESS CONSULTANT USED**

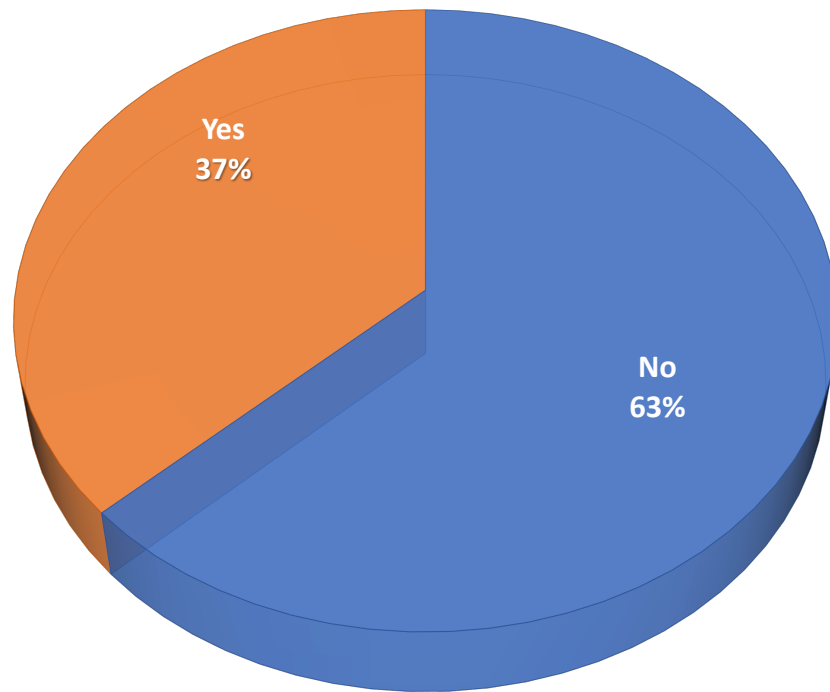


Figure 8 reports on incentives used by departments to motivate officers to pass an in-service fitness test. Almost half (45.5%) of responding departments offered vacation or compensatory time as a reward. This was followed by on-duty exercise time (32.4%), a salary incentive (13.2%), a free gym membership (8.8%) or some “Other” incentive not enumerated on the survey (8.8%). The adjacent figure depicts the consequences for in-service fitness test failure among agencies where fitness tests are mandatory. The two most common penalties included a hold on promotions or transfers (23.5%) and some “Other” consequence, most often a restriction on off-duty employment. This was followed by mandating an exercise program for under-performing officers (20.6%), nutritional counseling (16.2%), job termination (13.2%), and either suspension or demotion in rank (5.9%).

**FIGURE 8**

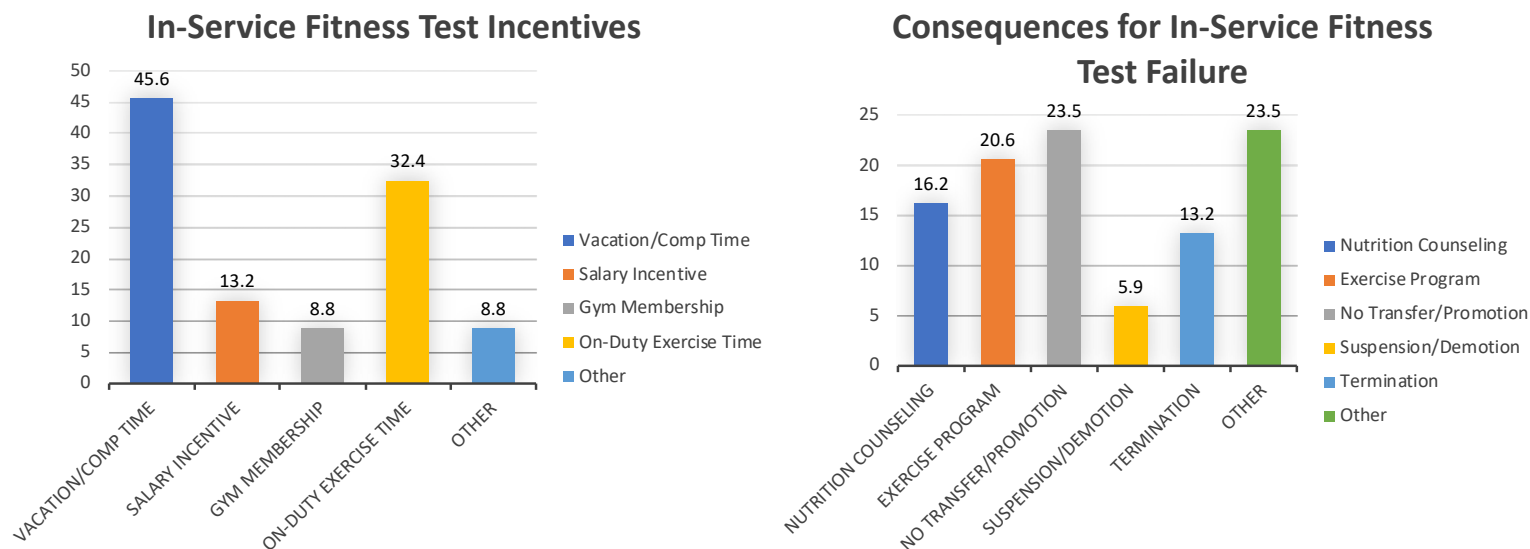


Figure 9 measures whether or not an Employee Assistance Program (substance abuse counseling/treatment) was available to an officer. Most responding agencies had such a program in place (81%) while 19% did not. In terms of costs associated with these programs, the adjacent figure illustrates that there is almost never a cost incurred by officers who utilize such a program; 92% of departments paid for programmatic costs while only 8% passed those costs on to officers as an out-of-pocket expense.

**FIGURE 9**

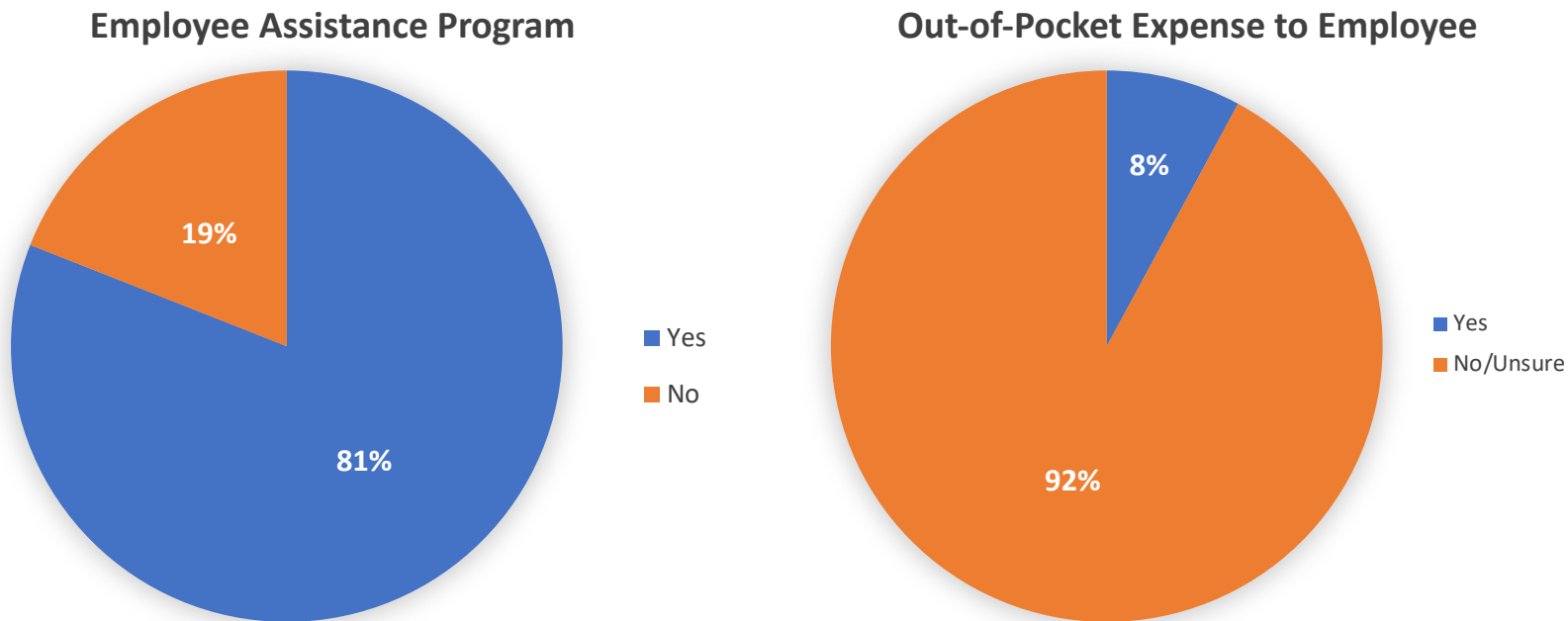
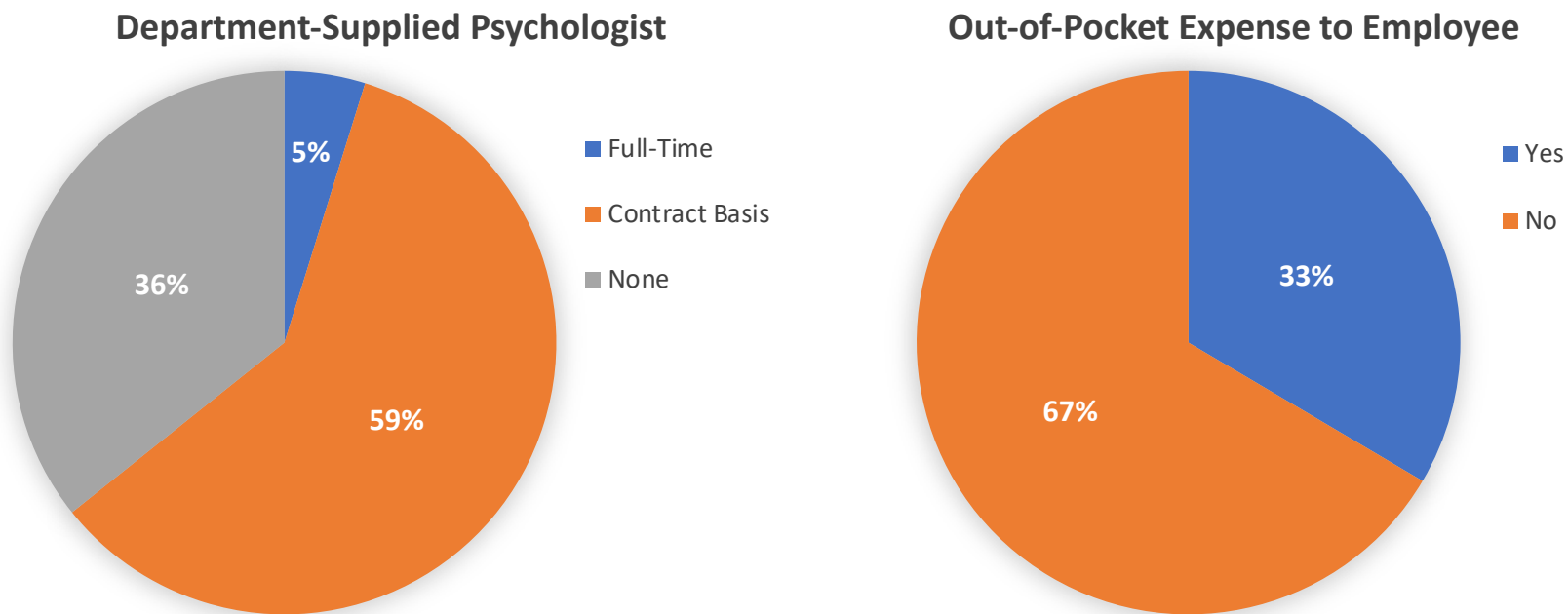


Figure 10 shows that 64% of responding agencies provided access to a psychologist. Of those departments, 59% provided psychological services on a contract basis while 5% had a full-time psychologist on staff. Thirty-six percent of the responding departments did not provide access to a psychologist. The adjacent figure indicates that two thirds (67%) of responding departments paid for psychological services utilized by their employees, while one third (33%) of responding agencies required that officers pay for counseling as an out-of-pocket expense.

**FIGURE 10**





According to Figure 11, 93% of responding agencies did not provide their employees with access to an agency-supplied nutritionist while a small percentage (7%) did. Similarly, 80% of agencies passed along the expense of a nutritionist to their employees as an out-of-pocket expense. Twenty-percent responding departments provided nutritionist services at no cost to their employees.

**FIGURE 11**

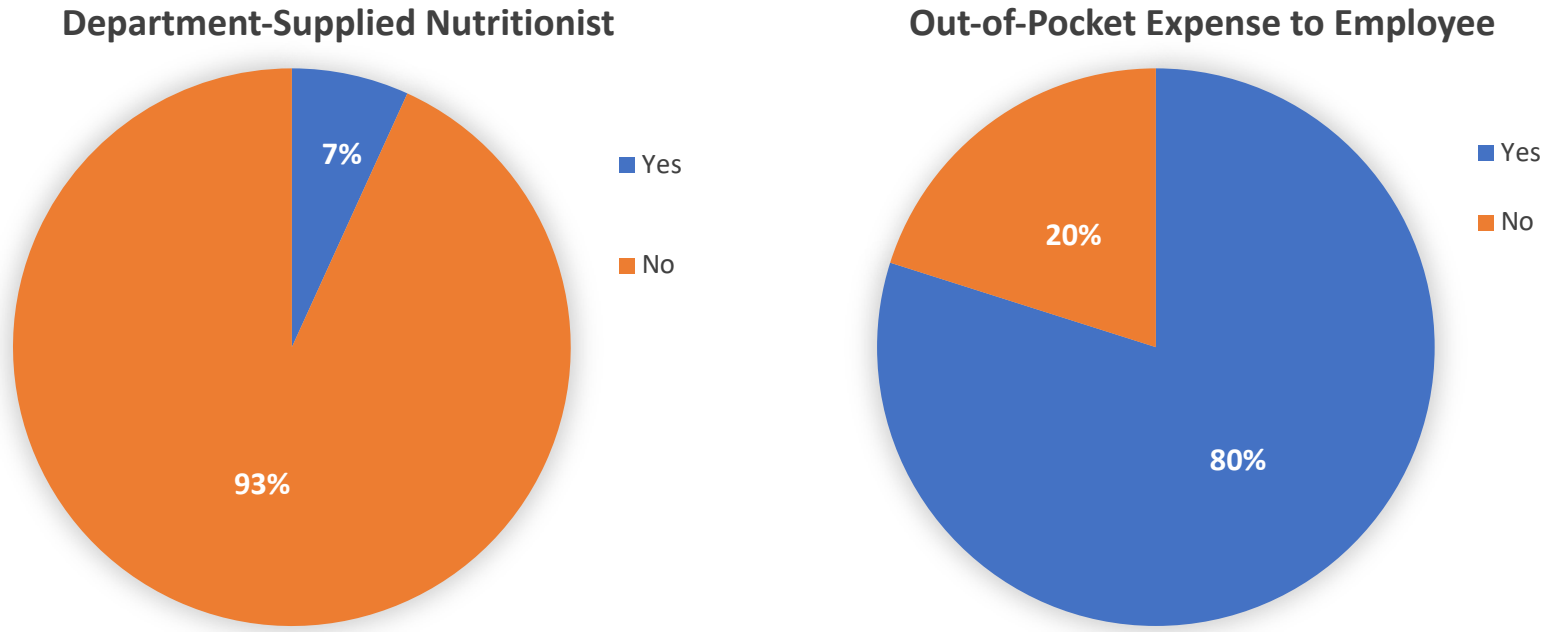


Figure 12 demonstrates that slightly more than half (53%) of responding departments provided a chaplain while 47% did not. The adjacent figure indicates that the vast majority of chaplains (94%) were volunteers while 3% were full-time, paid employees, and the remaining 3% were part-time, paid employees.

**FIGURE 12**

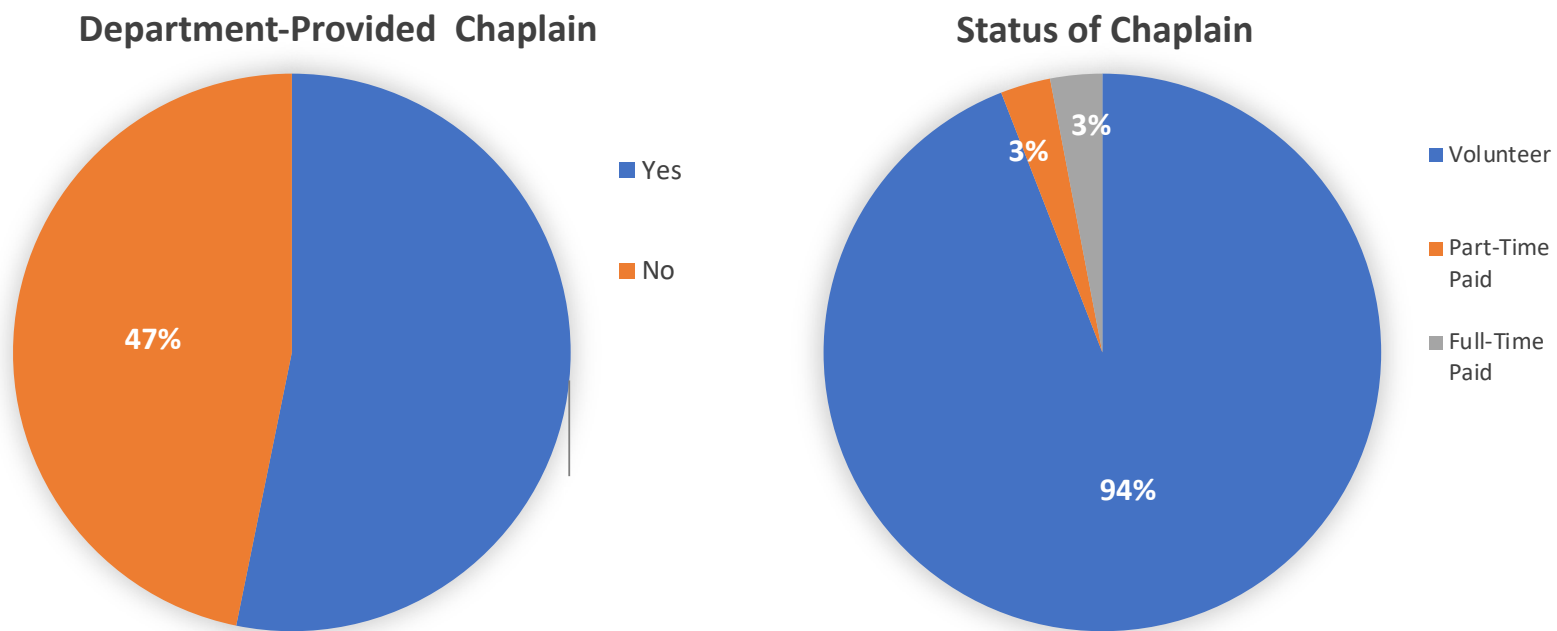
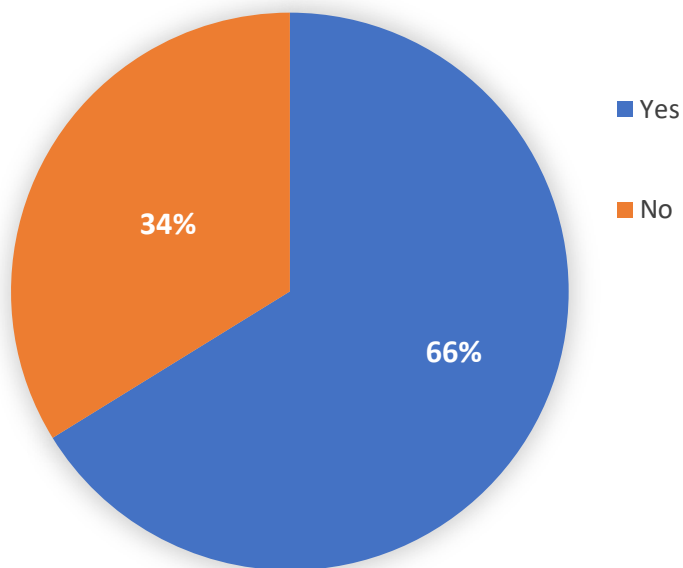


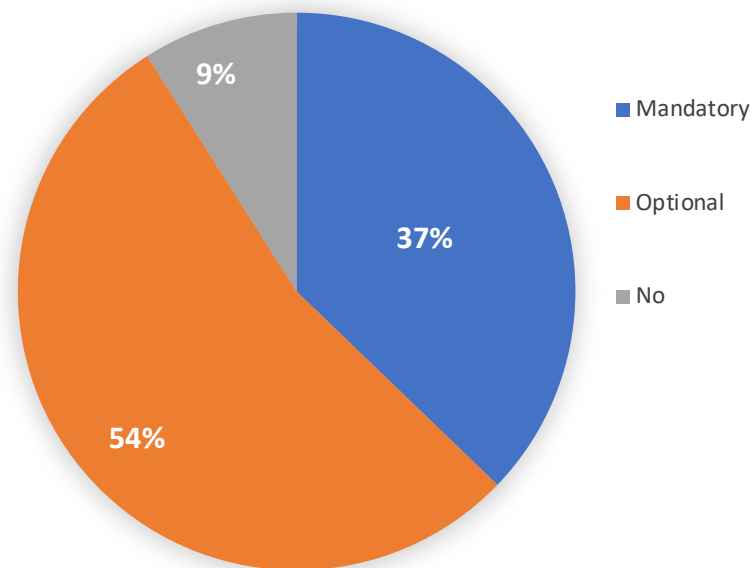
Figure 13 indicates that 66% of responding departments had a traumatic event policy or procedure in place while 34% of agencies did not. The adjacent figure shows that of those departments with traumatic incident policies in place, 54% made debriefing or counseling optional, 37% mandated that an officer engage in debriefing or counseling, and 9% did not have those services available.

**FIGURE 13**

**Traumatic Incident Policy/Procedure**



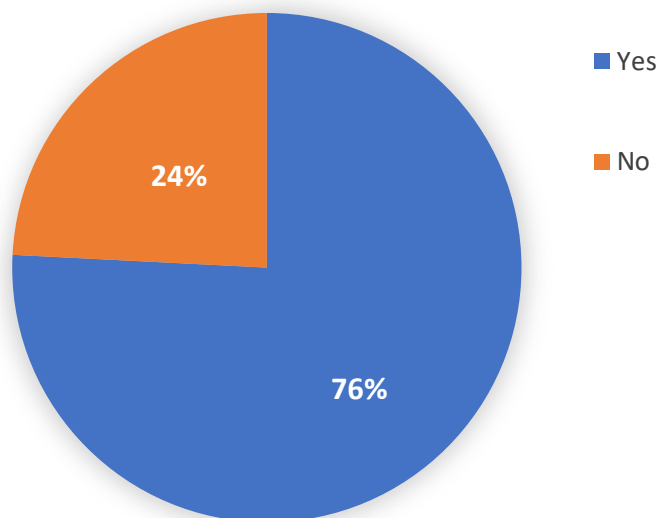
**Debriefing/Counseling Available**



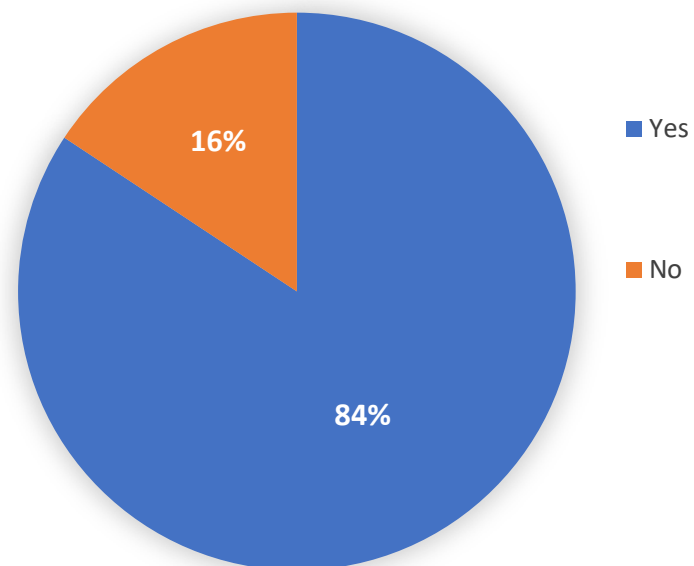
According to Figure 14, over three quarters (76%) of responding departments had a mental health policy or procedure in place in the wake of an officer-involved shooting while 24% of agencies did not. The adjacent figure indicates that for those departments with such a policy, 84% provided debriefing or counseling services while 16% did not provide any kind of after-action counseling.

**FIGURE 14**

**Officer-Involved Shooting Mental Health Policy/Procedure**



**Debriefing/Counseling Available**



## Summary and Conclusion

This limited study highlights several items for consideration and future research. First, it is curious that given the stated emphasis on physical fitness in law enforcement, over half of the agencies surveyed did not have a pre-employment fitness test. Future research should explore whether there are differences in cadet performance in academies, especially academy failures or remedial fitness training, between agencies that require a pre-employment fitness test and those that do not.

The most common events reported on pre-employment fitness tests and on in-service fitness test were historically the most conventional measures of fitness (timed run, pushups and sit-ups) that have always been used. In this era of “functional fitness,” some of the less commonly reported events (obstacle course, wall scale, dummy carry, etc.) may be better measures of what officers are actually expected to do on the job. Especially for agencies that continue to utilize traditional fitness measures, the linkage between job tasks and the fitness measures designed to represent those tasks should be empirically-based rather than historical or anecdotal. While the survey did not directly ask about timed rowing tests, 20 percent of responding agencies indicated they used these types of tests at the pre-employment stage, and two thirds reported using them as part of an in-service fitness requirement. While a rowing test certainly can measure overall cardio fitness (Metcalf, Castle, & Brewer, 2013) one wonders whether cardio output events or activities more closely related to actual on-the-job tasks might be better suited for law enforcement officers, most of whom do not regularly row boats on the job.

We note that nearly 20 percent of agencies report utilizing academies that do not have mandatory physical fitness requirements. That is a potentially troubling finding when nearly 50% of the policing population is out of shape (Collingswood et al., 2004; Quigley, 2008). Without exposure to fitness training while in the primary training phase for the job, and without being held to a reasonable, job-related standard of fitness before graduating from that training, how will new officers learn the importance of physical fitness to the job of a law enforcement officer? By its nature, law enforcement requires at least some degree of physical fitness proficiency. By not exposing officers to a practical and efficient fitness regime, candidates can be left unprepared for the physical rigors of the job. Moreover, a lack of physical fitness has been associated with more frequent injuries, increased use of sick time, disability, and chronic health problems, all of which incur significant (and perhaps avoidable) costs to a department (Nabeel et al., 2007; Quigley, 2008). For some officers, fitness may one day mean the difference between work and worker’s compensation or even between life and death.

Moreover, departments that do not have mandatory fitness standards in place should examine their reasons for that decision and consider the costs and benefits of an in-service fitness requirement. Again, the benefits of physical fitness are well documented in terms of reducing health problems, increasing career longevity, and improving professional effectiveness.

Departments should do all they can to promote and encourage fitness in their ranks, and holding officers to a fitness standard could certainly aid in accomplishing that goal.

While the majority of departments with in-service fitness policies and standards utilized an outside fitness consultant (63.2%) to assist them, any department could implement a basic fitness program at relatively low cost by taking advantage of officers who have knowledge of modern fitness approaches and who would be willing (perhaps with a minor incentive) to assist the agency with developing a fitness program. Even a voluntary program is better than no program at all. The same is true of nutritional information, proper eating, and/or weight loss. The use of incentives (rather than punishments) to motivate officers to achieve a certain fitness level or desirable weight is the first step in building a culture of fitness within an agency.

Over 80 percent of responding agencies had an employee assistance program available, and 90 percent of those departments did not charge employees for access to those services. Similarly, the majority of departments provided access to spiritual counseling, which is another component to the wellness equation. Police officers have elevated rates of suicide, substance abuse, and divorce compared to other professions. Agencies can and should take an active role in ensuring the long-term wellness of their officers.

However, perhaps the most troubling finding in this survey relates to the psychological well-being of officers. While nearly two thirds of responding agencies provided access to a psychologist, over one third did not. It is well established that police officers experience a greater degree of psychological trauma than most civilian professions and are at increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (Skogstad et al., 2013). Yet, over a third of the departments that provided information had no traumatic incident policy or procedure in place, and only 37 percent mandated counseling after exposure to traumatic events. Similarly, nearly a quarter of departments had no standing policy or procedure in place in the aftermath of a shooting incident.

Every department should move toward having a trauma policy in place, and every officer should be obligated to attend counseling or peer-debriefing in the wake of a traumatic event. Many times, officers do not realize they are traumatized or that repeated exposure to even low-level psychological trauma can have serious long-term impacts on emotional health and well-being. We recognize that access to preventative mental health services is a problem that is not easily solved. The U.S. lacks broad access to health care in general and mental health care in particular. Nevertheless, many free resources are available to agencies for establishing peer-support or similar mental health programs for their officers (see e.g. COPS Office, 2019). Other out-of-the-box solutions such as soliciting volunteer social work help, partnering with mental health care providers to seek regional solutions, and pooling resources to make mental health services available to all officers in Texas should be a priority.

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