

**Policing During the Pandemic: California Officers' Experiences**  
\*Preliminary Report



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Acknowledgements and Disclaimer: The authors would like to thank the officers who participated in the survey as well as the President of PORAC, Brian Marvel, for distributing the survey to its membership. The opinions and recommendations are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the Peace Officers Research Association of California.

## Background

COVID-19 has dramatically altered life for people, institutions, and governments around the world. The pandemic has led to the global mobilization of the medical and research communities and has created unprecedented economic shutdowns. According to the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Research Center<sup>[1]</sup>, as of June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the United States has had 2,003,930 confirmed cases with 113,038 deaths. In California, the site of our research setting, there have been 4,854 deaths (7<sup>th</sup> highest total in the country), and three counties in the state rank in the top 50 in the country with the total number confirmed cases: Los Angeles county (#2 with 67,111), Riverside county (#38 with 9,911), and San Diego county (#44 with 8,837).

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to collect time-sensitive information on California police officers' perceptions and their departmental experiences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, it sought to examine front-line officers' experiences regarding morale, stress, and risk following agency responses and changes in policy (e.g., shift patterns), service delivery innovations, and other administrative challenges during the pandemic. A disproportionate burden has fallen on law enforcement, like most other first responders. Members of the profession have continued to work and perform job duties without necessarily engaging in the same social distancing measures as the public at large. There is strong evidence that a large number of police agencies have made tremendous changes to policies/practices in response to the pandemic.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of prior literature on policing during pandemics as well as the impact that the current situation is having on departments and their officers. There are a few national data collection systems geared toward trying to understand what police agencies, at the organizational-level, are doing to handle the increased burden. There is, for example, a joint effort by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP) at George Mason University.<sup>[2]</sup> Additionally, the National Police Foundation launched a Real-Time COVID-19 Law Enforcement Impact Situational Awareness Dashboard to help law enforcement leaders better assess and monitor the impact COVID-19 is having on law enforcement agencies across the United States.<sup>[3]</sup> The American Society of Evidence-Based Policing has also created a Law Enforcement COVID Portal to serve as a centralized information-sharing resource for police departments worldwide to share how they are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in real time.<sup>[4]</sup>

These efforts, however, have examined departments as a whole and it is largely chief executives or a representative on their behalf who are filling out surveys/questionnaires. Absent much of the

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<sup>1</sup> This resource can be accessed at <<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> See Lum, Maupin, and Stoltz (2020)'s *The impact of COVID-19 on law enforcement agencies (Wave 1)*. A joint report of the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University. <<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/law-enforcement-information-on-covid-19>>.

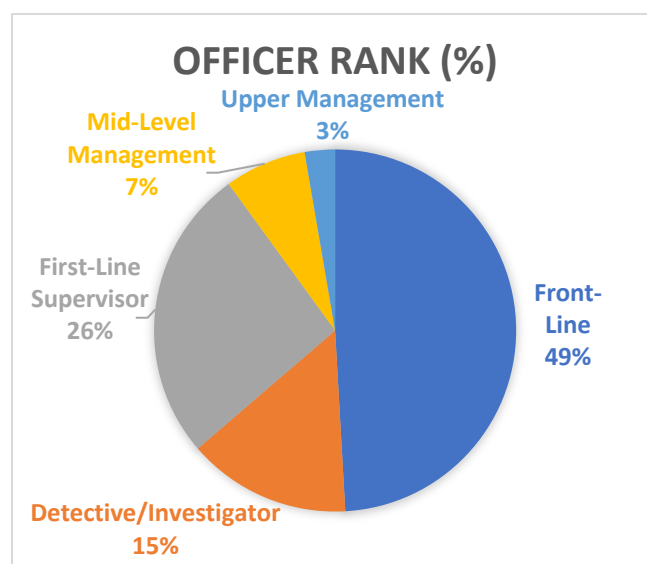
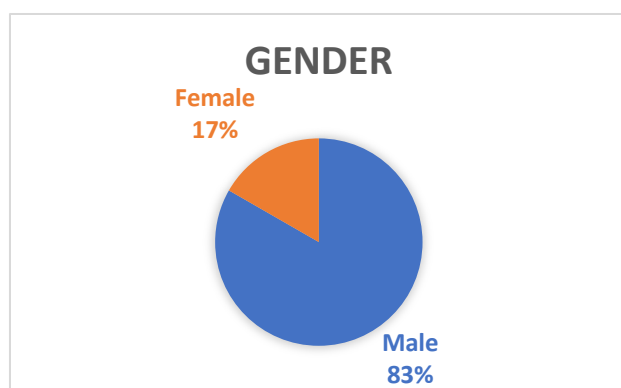
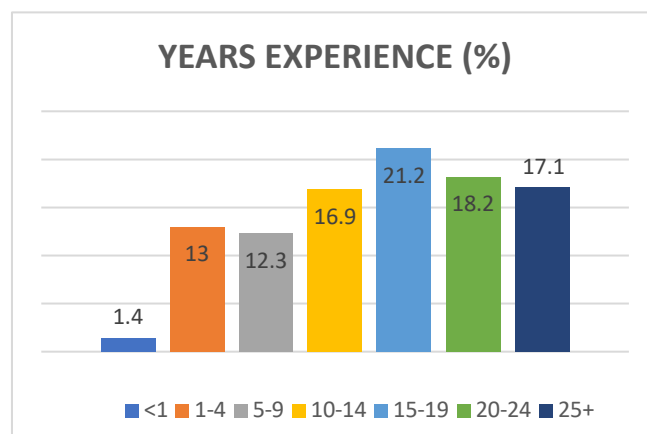
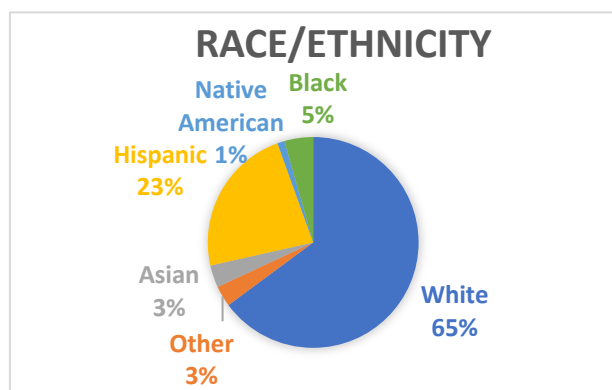
<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.policefoundation.org/covid-19/#Dashboard>>.

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.americansebpcovid.org/>>.

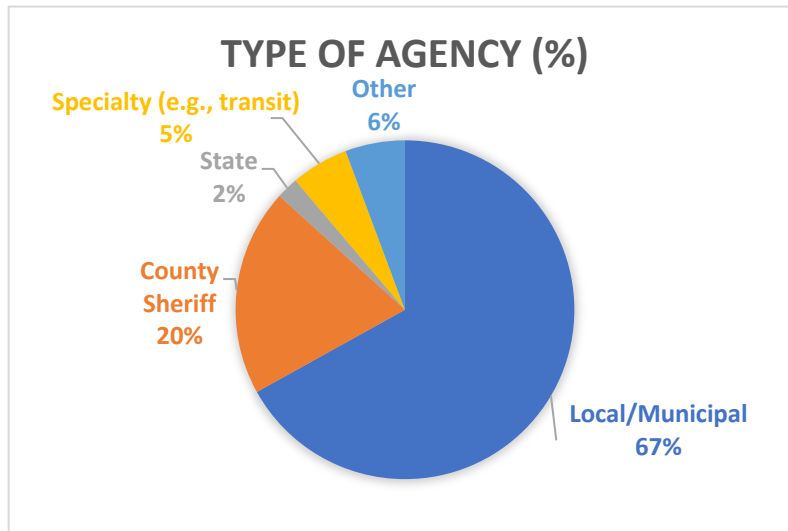
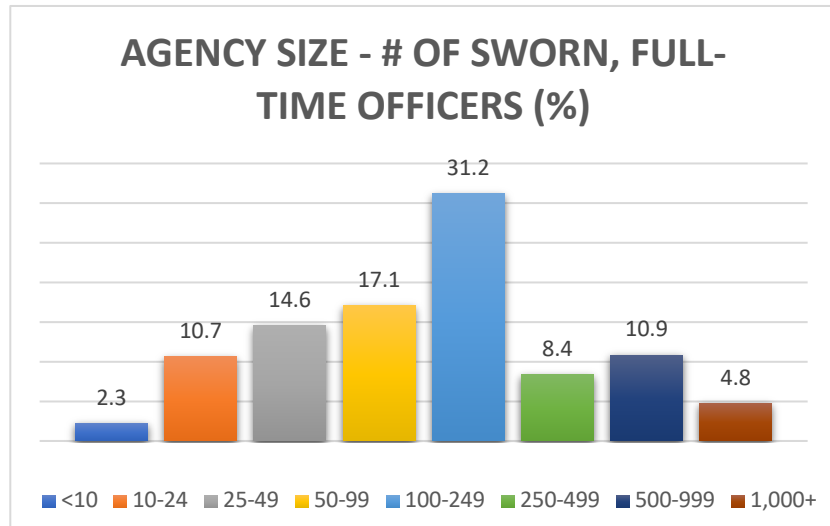
discussion is the individual, front-line officer voice throughout this process.<sup>[5]</sup> This is the first data collection effort, to our knowledge, focused specifically on front-line officers and their experiences throughout this pandemic.

## Methods & Sample

This report is based on the responses of 440 police officers throughout the state of California. With the assistance of Brian Marvel, president of the Peace Officers Research Association of California (PORAC), members of the organization received an email describing the purpose of the research project with a link to the online survey through Qualtrics; two additional reminders were sent out in the following weeks. Data collection took place throughout the month May 2020. The data were cross-sectional in nature with a convenience sample of officers willing to participate.



<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Magny's (2020, April 7) Blog post for the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing, *What COVID-19 Can Teach Us about the Importance of Evidence-Based Policing?* <<https://www.americansebp.org/what-covid-19-can-teach-us-about-the-importance-of-evidence-based-policing/>>.



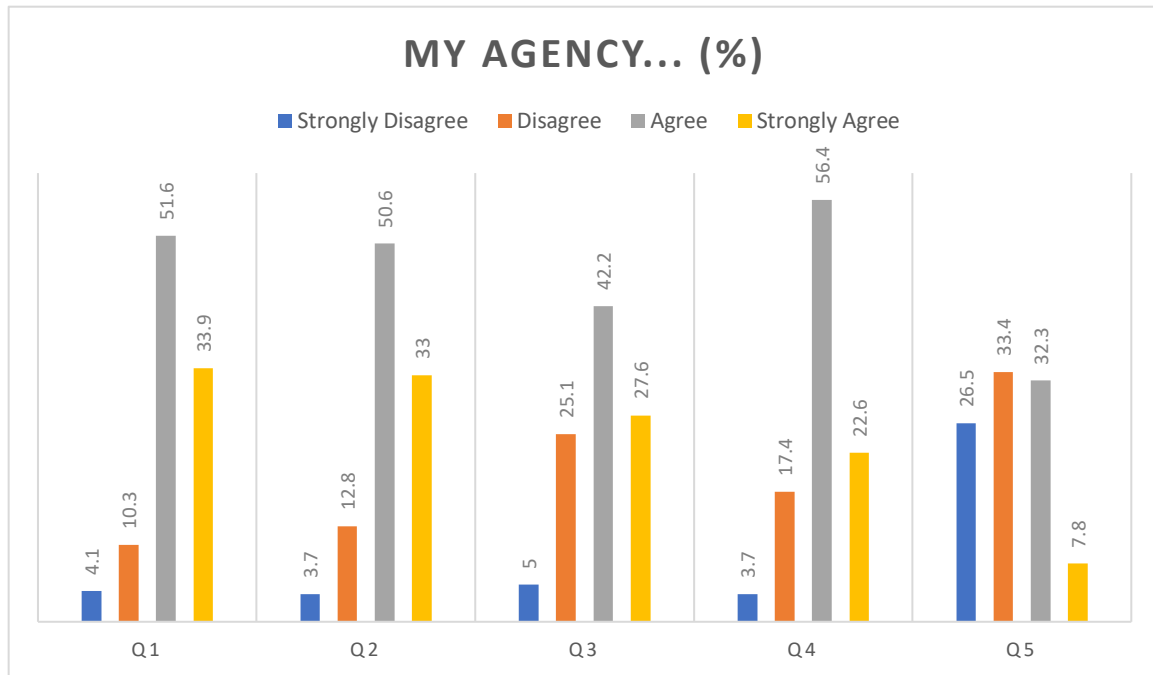
The sample is fairly representative of the population of sworn, full-time law enforcement officers in the state of California.<sup>6</sup> Officers in the sample are more likely to be employed by local/municipal agencies (67% vs. 48%) and less likely to be employed by county sheriffs (20% vs. 39%) and state agencies (e.g., California Highway Patrol) (2% vs. 10%). Women make up 17% of the sample compared to 13% statewide. There is also sufficient representation across officer race/ethnicity, years' experience, and agency size. The vast majority of officers are front-line staff and first-line supervisors opposed to mid-level/upper management. 48 out of the 58 California counties are represented in the sample (83%).

<sup>6</sup> Compared to statistics from the Public Policy Institute of California's (2018) report *Law Enforcement Staffing in California*. <<https://www.ppic.org/publication/law-enforcement-staffing-in-california/>>.

## Findings

The results for this preliminary report will be largely descriptive using univariate statistics.  
\*Numbers listed in the bar charts are percentages; totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

### *Agency Responsivity to Officer Needs*



Q1: My agency...has taken steps to minimize unnecessary contact with the public.

Q2: My agency...has supplied me & my colleagues w/ adequate personal protective equipment.

Q3: My agency...has made officer safety its number one priority.

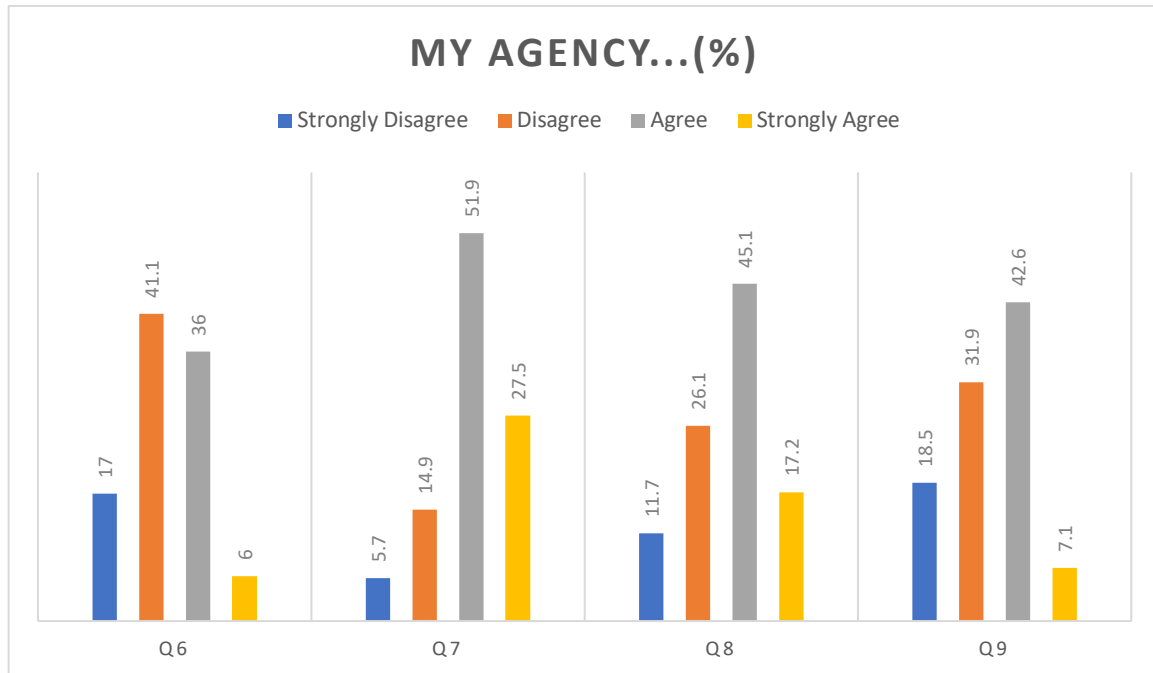
Q4: My agency...has balanced both the risk of officers with the safety of citizens.

Q5: My agency...has made it easy & convenient for me & my colleagues to get tested for COVID-19.

Respondents generally felt that their respective agencies were responsive to their needs; however, there was substantial disagreement for select actions (or the perceived lack thereof).

\* = questions where there was less consensus.

- 85.5% agreed their agencies took steps to minimize unnecessary contact with public (33.9% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q1)
- 83.6% agreed their agencies supplied them/their colleagues with adequate PPE (33% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q2)
- \*A little over 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s (69.8%) agreed that their agencies made officer safety its number 1 priority; yet, approximately 1/3<sup>rd</sup> (30.1%) disagreed with such a statement. (Q3)
- 79% agreed their agencies balanced the risk of officers with the safety of citizens (22.6% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q4)
- \*More than half (59.9) disagreed that their agencies made it easy & convenient for them/colleagues to get tested for COVID-19 (26.5% of whom “strongly disagreed”). Q5



Q6: My agency...is taking active steps to maintain officers' mental health during this crisis.

Q7: My agency...has been flexible in allowing officers to self-quarantine when they believe they're sick.

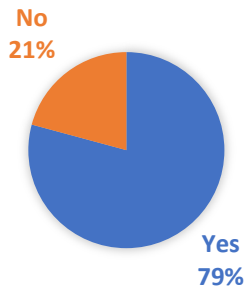
Q8: My agency...is equipped with a sustainable amount of supplies and PPE for officers for the next few months.

Q9: My agency...was prepared for this pandemic and has done a good job adapting to challenges and demands.

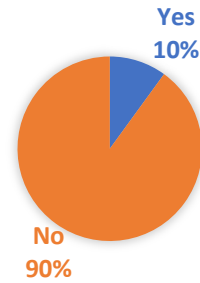
- \*More than half (58.1%) disagreed that their agencies took active steps to maintain officers' mental health during the crisis (17% of whom "strongly disagreed"). Q6
- 79.4% agreed their agencies had been flexible in allowing officers to self-quarantine when they believed they were sick (27.5% of whom "strongly agreed"). (Q7)
- \*A little less than 2/3<sup>rds</sup> (62.3%) agreed that their agencies were equipped with a sustainable amount of supplies and PPE for officers for the next few months; more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> (37.8%) disagreed with such a statement. (Q8)
- \*Officers were split on whether they felt their agencies were prepared for the pandemic and had done a good job adapting to challenges & demands: 49.7% agreed and 50.4% disagreed (18.5% of whom "strongly disagreed"). (Q9)

Departmental Changes in the Wake of COVID-19: “How have things changed following the response to COVID-19 (e.g., mid-March)?”

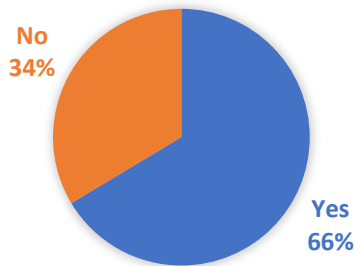
**HANDLING CALLS FOR SERVICE OVER THE PHONE/REMOTELY.**



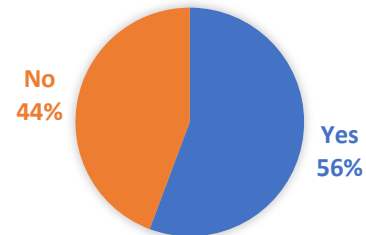
**ONLY LEAVING THE STATION/HQ FOR HIGH PRIORITY CALLS.**



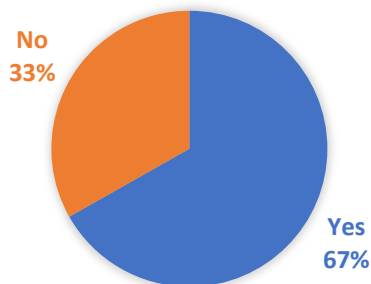
**RESTRICTIONS ON TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT.**



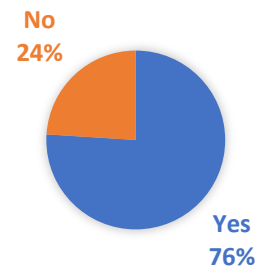
**ELIMINATING PRE-SHIFT BRIEFINGS OR HOLDING THEM OUTSIDE FOR MORE DISTANCE.**



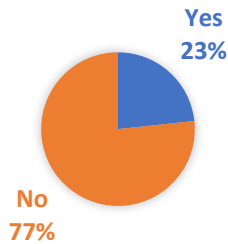
**RESTRICTIONS ON PROACTIVE/SELF-INITIATED ACTIVITIES.**



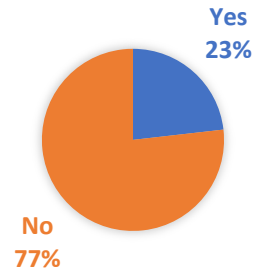
**ISSUING CITATIONS OR TAKING NO FORMAL ACTION IN LIEU OF MAKING ARRESTS.**



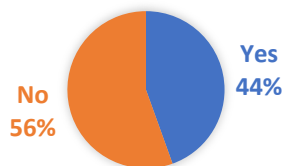
**ISSUING  
CITATIONS/MAKING  
ARRESTS FOR VIOLATIONS  
OF SHELTER-IN-PLACE  
ORDERS.**



**INCREASED  
COMMUNITY OUTREACH  
(E.G., DELIVERING FOOD  
TO ELDERLY POPS.)**



**INCREASED OFFICER  
PRESENCE AT HIGHLY  
TRAFFICKED PLACES  
(E.G., GROCERY STORES).**

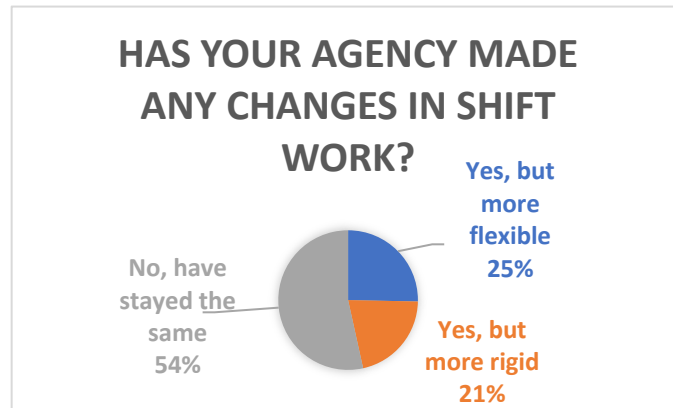


Select agencies appear to have drastically altered activities for officers; however, these changes were not universal; some were more common than others. The following list ranks the departmental changes that were made from most to least prevalent:

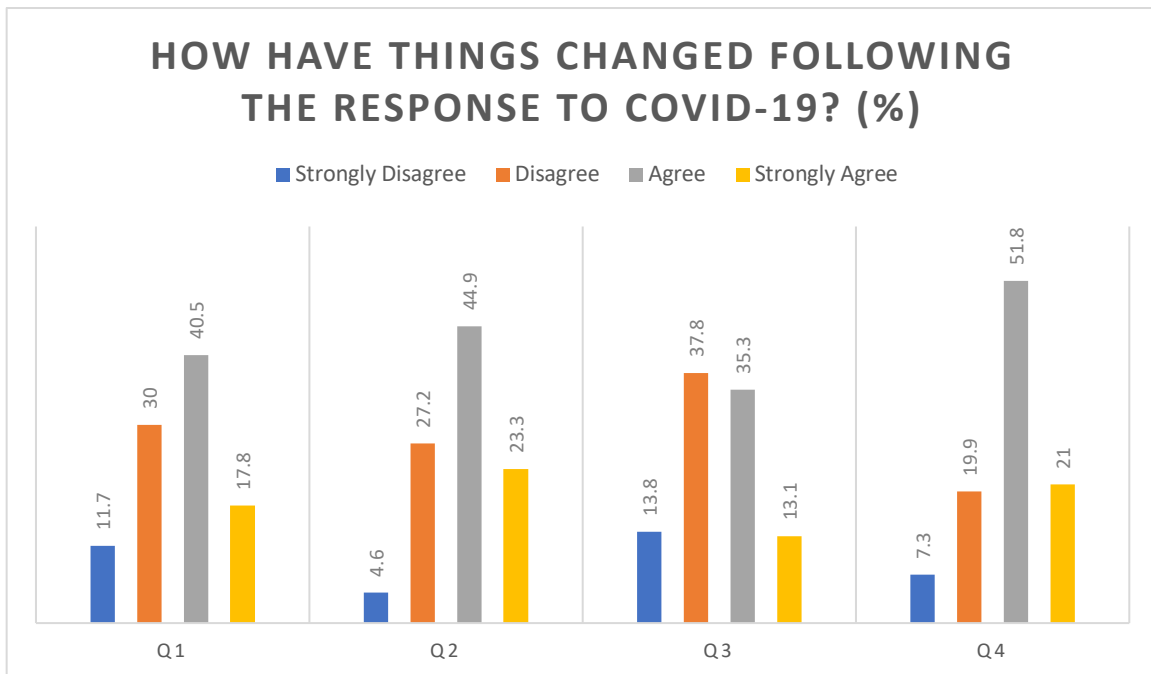
- 79% of respondents indicated their agencies “handled calls for service over the phone/remotely.”
- 76% indicated their agencies “issued citations or took no formal action in lieu of arrests.”
- 67% indicated their agencies “placed restrictions on proactive/self-initiated activities.”
- 66% indicated their agencies “placed restrictions on traffic enforcement.”
- 56% indicated their agencies “eliminated pre-shift briefings or held them outside.”
- 44% indicated their agencies “increased officer presence at highly trafficked places (e.g., grocery stores; Walmart).”
- 23% indicated their agencies “issued citations/made arrests for shelter-in-place order violations.”
- 23% indicated their agencies “increased community outreach (e.g., delivered food to vulnerable/elderly populations).”
- 10% indicated their agencies instructed officers to “only leave the station/HQ for high priority calls.”



*Changes as a Result of the COVID-19 Response & Comparative Perceptions*



Most respondents suggested that their agencies either did not make changes to work schedules (54%) or made them more flexible (25%); one in five (21%) indicated work schedules became more rigid (e.g., mandatory hours; more consecutive days on).



Q1: My personal level of morale is down.

Q2: Department morale is down.

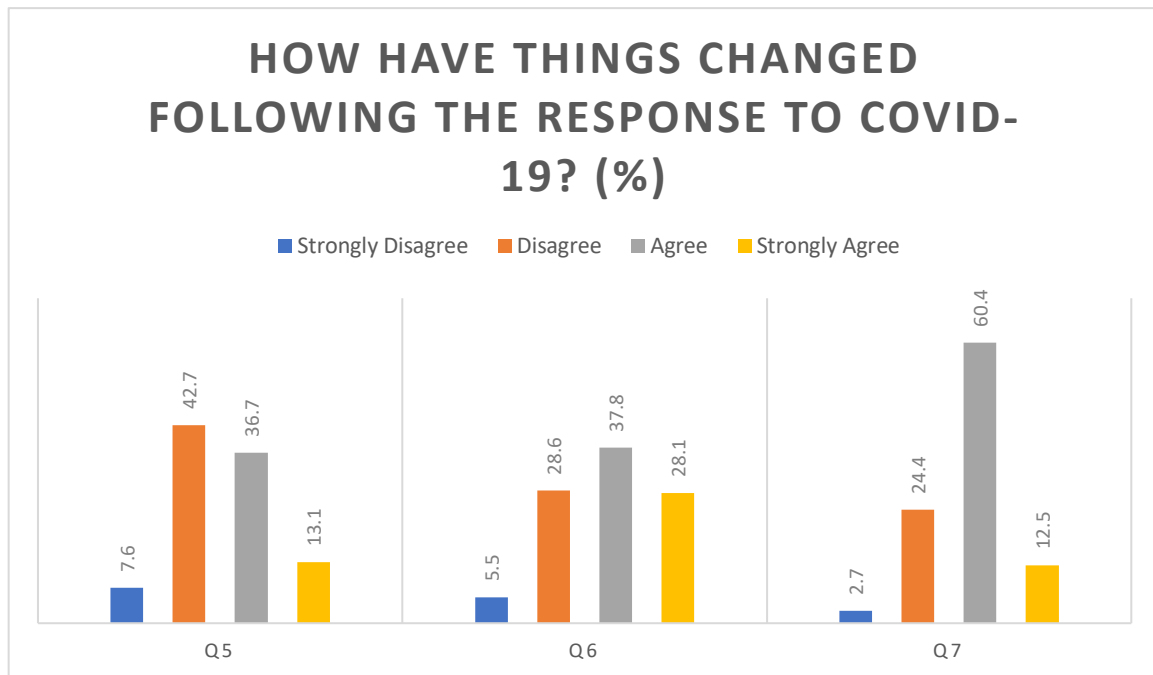
Q3: I often feel at danger of being exposed to COVID-19 while working.

Q4: Working among the public has become more dangerous for exposure to COVID-19.

Respondents generally felt that things (e.g., morale; stress; risk/danger) had changed; however, there was substantial disagreement for most questions.

\* = questions where there was less consensus.

- \*More than half (58.3%) agreed that their personal level of morale had deteriorated (17.8% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q1)
- \*A little over 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s (68.2%) agreed that morale throughout their departments had deteriorated (23.3% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q2)
- \* Officers were split on whether they felt at danger of being exposed to COVID-19 while working: 48.4% agreed and 51.6% disagreed. (Q3)
- 72.8% agreed that working among the public has become more dangerous for exposure to COVID-19 (21% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q4)



Q5: Organizational changes have caused an increase in my stress.

Q6: Some people have taken advantage of our lax policy changes/lack of proactivity.

Q7: Citizens seem to be more appreciative of law enforcement during this pandemic.

- \*Officers were split on whether they believed organizational changes have caused an increase in their level of stress: 49.8% agreed and 50.3% disagreed. (Q5)

Two questions were also directed toward officers’ perceptions of citizens:

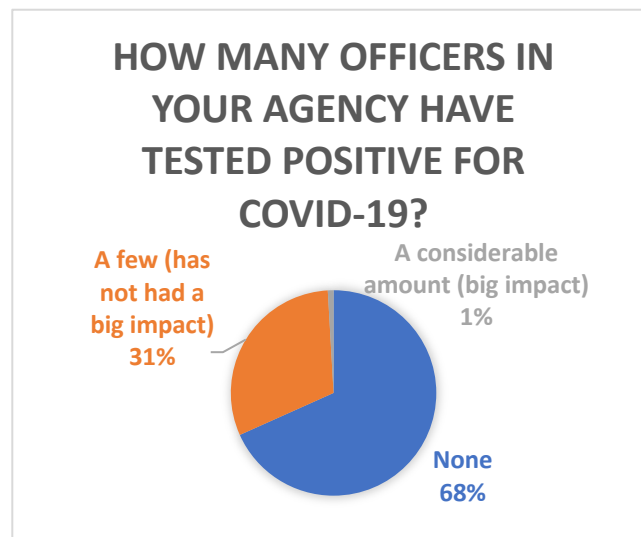
- \*2/3<sup>rd</sup>s (65.9%) agreed that some citizens have taken advantage of their department’s lax policy changes/lack of proactivity (28.1% of whom “strongly agreed”). (Q6)
- 72.9% agreed that citizens seem to be more appreciative of law enforcement during the pandemic. (Q7)

Very few respondents tested positive for COVID-19. In fact, the vast majority had not contracted COVID-19.

- 0.5% had tested positive
- 99.5% had not

A larger percentage of respondents indicated that a family member or close friend tested positive for COVID-19.

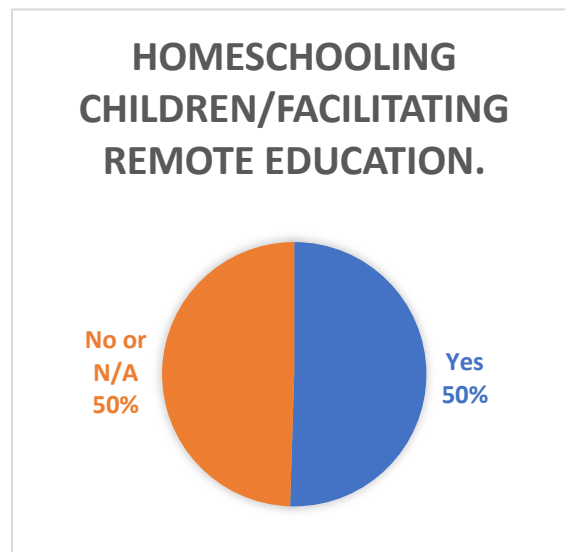
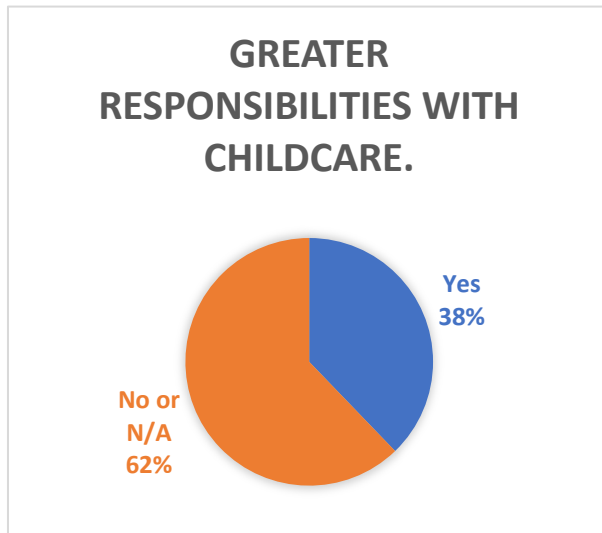
- 9.6% said “Yes”
- 90.4% said “No”



COVID-19 and the number of officers testing positive has not had a considerable impact on agencies in terms of personnel.

- 68% indicated they were unaware of any officers testing positive.
- 31% indicated only a few officers tested positive, which did not have a big impact on their agency.
- Only 1% of respondents indicated that a considerable amount of officers tested positive, which significantly impacted their agency.

*Impact on Personal Life – Implications for Work-Life Balance*



A large percentage of officers indicated that there were drastic changes to their personal lives in the wake of COVID-19.

- More than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of respondents (38%) had “greater responsibilities with childcare.”
- One-half of respondents (50%) had an increased burden of homeschooling their children/facilitating remote education.
- A little less than one-half of respondents (45%) indicated that their spouse/partner was also an essential worker or first-responder.

## **Next Steps**

As previously stated, the findings from this preliminary report present basic descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics highlight considerable variation in officers' responses, which can be examined further. The next phase of analysis will investigate if/how the aforementioned perceptions, such as agency responsiveness to officer needs and departmental activities (e.g., changes in policies/practices) in the wake of the COVID-19 response (i.e., those measures provided in this report) vary across officer demographics (race/ethnicity, gender, years' experience) and agency characteristics (size, type). Bivariate relationships and correlations among these variables will be explored.

Finally, multivariate analyses will be conducted, which will take into consideration a number of control variables. One area of research that we are most interested in examining is whether officers' perceptions of organizational justice (i.e., how employees view their supervisors/leaders in terms of fairness) act as a barrier/protective factor versus a detriment for managing the morale, stress, etc. that may have been impacted by drastic organizational changes during the pandemic response.

## **About the Authors**

John Shjarback, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Law and Justice Studies at Rowan University. He is a policing researcher, and his recent work has examined officer-involved shootings and transactional violence between police and citizens.

Obed Magny, Ed.D. is one of the co-founders and Executive Committee Members of the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing (ASEBP) where he is also the Editor-in-Chief of the monthly blog posts. He is a National Institute of Justice LEADS Scholar Alumni, a Policing Fellow at the National Police Foundation, and police officer for the city of Sacramento.