

# Survey on Police Stress and Conflict During The COVID-19 Pandemic

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Accepted: 15 March 2022 | Published: 1 April 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajbs.2022.4.1.6>

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**Abstract:** *The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a roadmap for a more prosperous and sustainable future. Goal 16 stipulates that everyone should have access to justice and that courts and the justice system should be a key component of national accountability systems. Institutional objectives include the police, prosecutors, courts, jail system, and justice and policing ministries. As a result, police officers play a crucial role in guaranteeing the safety of residents by protecting their lives. There is a commitment to live in safety and prosperity throughout the Goal 16 objectives. The COVID-19 outbreak affected many aspects of society, causing societal upheaval and changing customs, but first responders were particularly heavily afflicted. The purpose of police officers was to organize local shutdowns, foster social distance, and enforce stay-at-home requirements. Police personnel must encourage social separation and the use of face masks in order to reduce or break the COVID-19 epidemic's chain. As a result, documenting the magnitude of these effects is critical for justifying and efficiently targeting officers' responses, helping agencies and individuals to weather the storm. The stress and conflict issues that police officers face is addressed in this research. Furthermore, this study aims to assess the stress and conflict issues that police personnel experience. This study was conducted using a quantitative research design. The policemen from the Petaling Jaya District Police Headquarters are the respondents. A questionnaire is used to collect data, then analyzed using SPSS. This study's weakness is that more qualitative research is needed to go deeper into conflict and stress among police officers. According to the findings, most police officers have been stressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and their increased workload. Furthermore, the study discovered that generational disparities in personality could lead to professional conflict among police personnel. According to the findings, police officers require a robust support system to ensure that their stress and conflict may be resolved or minimized during these challenging moments.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, COVID-19, police officers, stress

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## 1. Introduction

Working in law enforcement is often portrayed as a stressful job that leads to conflict (Lambert, Qureshi & Frank, 2016). Working as a cop entails much stress and a lot of unpleasant situations. This can harm police officers' mental and physical health, interpersonal relationships, and work-life balance (Viegas & Henriques, 2021). Furthermore, police officers' burnout was positively linked to professional stress (Griffin & Sun, 2018). According to research, police

work is a stressful job, and this stress harms officers' mental and physical health, performance, and interactions with citizens. Mental health in the workplace has become a concern due to the high incidence of depression, anxiety, burnout, and even suicide among police personnel. As a result, it is necessary to regularly track stress and burnout levels to promote occupational health (Queirós, Passos, Bártolo, Marques, da Silva, & Pereira, 2020).

Malaysia issued a Movement Control Order (MCO) to halt COVID-19 from spreading around the world. The Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), and other authorities regulate citizen movement. Their primary objective has been to protect individuals' health and well-being by regulating MCO enforcement since March 2020. The number of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia has been steadily increasing, adding to the police force's already severe workload — suffering that only these officers could explain in the name of ensuring Malaysians' safety. Despite the recovery MCO ending on December 31, 2020, the government has declared that the Conditional MCO will begin on October 14, 2020 in Sabah, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor to an unexpected rise of COVID-19 cases approaching triple digits. Because the function requires police officers to approach individuals at close range, even while wearing face masks, social distance cannot be imposed to maintain peace and order in the country. The spread of the Covid-19 illness is growing increasingly severe, and many police officers have been exposed to the disease's risk. COVID-19 infection has impacted the ability of police officers to execute their duties because they are on the front lines and closest to the people. Due to their sacrifices during the MCO, these officers may face various stress and conflict in carrying out their official duties, which will be the topic of this essay.

## **2. Problem Statement**

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a novel coronavirus first found in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Police personnel faced new and increased pressures as a result of COVID-19. They had to implement additional methods to enforce social separation, even though stay-at-home orders were being challenged on political, economic, and legal grounds. As agents of new and unpopular limitations, officers may have sensed increased anxiety and displeasure from the citizens they served (Shirzad, Abbasi Farajzadeh, Hosseini Zijoud, & Farnoosh, 2020). They had to change their operations to accommodate the "viral reality." Community and offender programs, service call responses, and patrol procedures had to be altered to limit exposure and ensure enough cops stayed healthy to protect public safety. If police officers avoided serving the public or made a minor arrest to limit their exposure, these changes, which generally focused on limiting human contact, could have caused cognitive dissonance. The COVID-19 pandemic was a dreadful occurrence in and of itself, providing a constant risk of bodily harm and driving cops to become more hypervigilant of their surroundings. Daily stress, safety restrictions, and practices of social isolation may have limited their ability to deploy good coping techniques virally (Stogner, Miller & McLean, 2020).

Long and frequently rotating shifts, threats of violence, an increased requirement for hypervigilance, and a lack of public support combine to make policing one of the most mentally draining jobs, resulting in chronic stress (Hartley, Burchfiel, Fekedulegn, Andrew, & Violanti, 2011; McCraty & Atkinson, 2012; Paoline, 2003; Terrill, Paoline, & Manning, 2003). Police officers work in a high-stress, high-conflict environment (Biggam, Power, MacDonald, Carcary, & Moodie, 1997). As a result, law enforcement professionals suffer from mental health disorders at a higher incidence than the average population, even before dealing with added pandemic issues, stress, and uncertainty (Hartley et al., 2011).

### ***Sustainable Development Goals***

In order to make the proposed 2030 SDGs a reality, the public sector must play an important role. Governments worldwide cannot function well without the enabling structures of public administration to deliver on their mandates, which are mostly set out in (political) manifestos, while also ensuring that the core mandate of meeting citizens' basic welfare needs is met through an efficient system. The functioning of such a system must enable entities or agents to behave in the best interests of delivering high-quality services, which would have already been determined by legal regulation – this should also make it easier for agents to operate in the presence of information symmetry (Jackson and Jabbie, 2019). Leadership in the public service should guarantee that mandatory services are made accessible to the community to support the efficient functioning of the public service, particularly in the area of economic and social wellbeing (Jackson, 2020). As a result, the public sector must spend on solid security, such as policing, with the ultimate goal of reducing crime. Goal 16 states that all people should have access to justice and that courts and the justice system should be an integral part of national accountability systems. The police, prosecutors, courts, jail system, and ministries that deal with justice and policing are all institutional targets. As a result, police officers perform a critical role in ensuring that citizens live safely by safeguarding their lives. Throughout the Goal 16 aims, there is a commitment to live in safety and prosperity (United Nation, n.d). During COVID-19, the safety of emergency service providers such as medical professionals and police officers is generally prioritized. However, in the face of the COVID-19 epidemic, police officers face a variety of new obstacles, which may put them under further strain.

### ***Definition of Stress***

Occupational stress is a type of psychological stress that is caused by one's work. Occupational stress is a long-term condition. Understanding the stressful conditions at work and taking actions to alleviate such factors can help manage occupational stress (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Workers may experience occupational stress if they do not feel supported by their bosses or coworkers if they feel they have little influence over the work they do, or if their efforts on the job are not commensurate with the job's rewards (WHO, 2020). Employees' emotional wellbeing, physical health, and job performance are all affected by workplace stress, a problem for both employees and employers (Sulsky & Smith, 2005).

### ***Definition of Conflict***

Conflict is rarely perceived as constructive; but, moderate amounts of conflict can be seen as mutually beneficial in specific situations (such as competition), fostering understanding, tolerance, learning, and effectiveness (Jowett, 2007). According to Afzalur (2010), all definitions of conflict include knowing conflicting interests and the process of attempting to stop the opposing perspective or views. Afzalur's proposed definition of conflict is "an interaction process exhibited in incompatibility, disagreement, or discord inside or between social units," based on this. Afzalur further points out that a dispute might contain a single person who is conflicted inside himself (the intrapersonal conflict). Afzalur mentions several conflict behaviors, beginning with disagreement and progressing to verbal abuse and interference.

## **3. Methodology**

The researchers have employed a cross-sectional study rather than a longitudinal, experimental, or quasi-experimental study as a research design. The variables in this cross-sectional analysis are observed without attempting to change them (Cherry, 2019). Moreover, cross-sectional research allows for collecting data from a large number of people and the examination of

differences between them. Another benefit of cross-sectional research is that it saves time and effort because data may be collected at a single point in time.

Respondents in this study were police officers from Petaling Jaya District Police Headquarters. The researchers used convenient sampling to distribute the online questionnaire to the respondents. The sampling size was decided on Krejcie & Morgan's sampling table (1970). Thus, according to the table, the sample size should be about 1500 respondents. However, only 53 respondents willing to answer the online questionnaire. The data are collected by using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three sections: the demographic profile, potential sources of stress, and causes of conflict.

Online questionnaire (Google Forms) is used in this research because of their low cost and flexibility. An online questionnaire is a highly suggested approach when used in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire was circulated via online platforms such as WhatsApp, and Facebook. The questionnaire is multilingual, with portions written in both English and Malay. The goal is to make the questionnaire more user-friendly while also ensuring that respondents who do not understand English can complete it. The researchers then used SPSS to analyze the data.

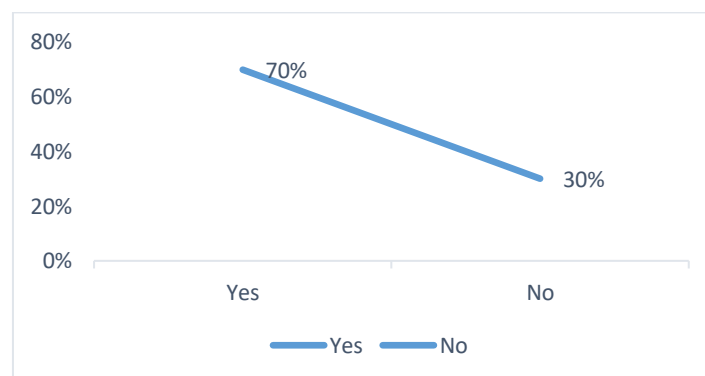
## 4.0 Findings and Discussion

### *Stress*

#### *Potential Sources of Stress*

##### *a. General working conditions*

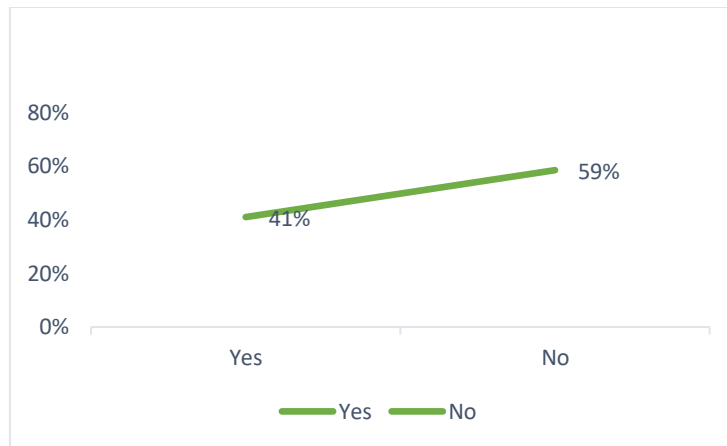
For the question, are the tasks assigned to the police officers since the COVID-19 pandemic has put more work pressure on them than before, resulting in 70% of them agreeing compared to 30% (figure 4.1) of them that not. According to Barasa (2017), units of positive change in technological, human, and organizational environments substantially influence regular police officers' performance in order to improve the workplace conditions.



**Figure 4.1: General working conditions**

##### *b. Workload*

For the question, whether the police officers feel more depressed since the COVID-19 pandemic along with the workload given to them, 59% of them did not feel depressed compared to 41% (figure 4.2) of them. According to a study conducted by Stotland and Pendleton (1989), the sources of stress and strain among high workload police officers appear to be stress-producing events in their lives in general and stress-producing events while performing the job of patrol officer and dealing with crime and related matters.



**Figure 4.2: Workload**

***Stress Management in the Workplace***

***a. Identifying the Source of Stress at Work***

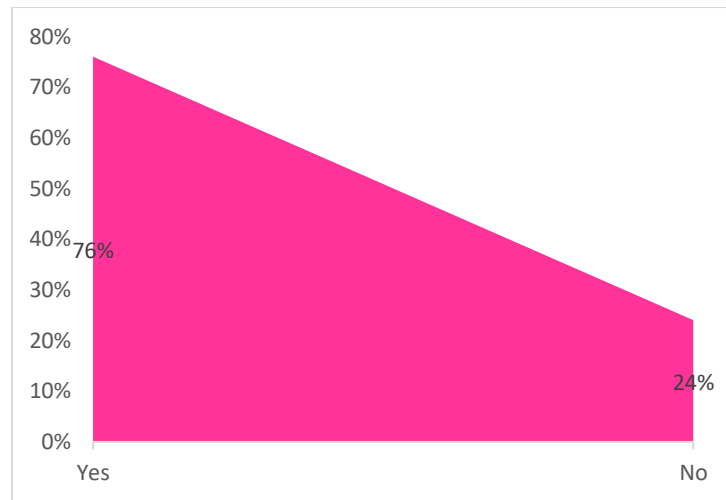
91% of the police officers agreed that by identifying the source of stress at work, they could control it better than 9% (figure 4.3) of the remaining police officers. Their employment jeopardizes the police officers' mental and physical wellbeing. A workplace in which resources are insufficient to meet demand, as well as the pressures that emerge from this, may contribute to managerial actions that harm subordinate wellbeing (Clements, Sharples & Kinman, 2021).



**Figure 4.3: Identifying the Source of Stress at Work**

***b. Getting Help from Co-workers, Supervisors, Or Friends to Manage Stress***

76% of the police officers agreed that their co-workers, supervisors, or friends could help manage their stress compared to 24% (figure 4.4) of the remaining police officers.



**Figure 4.4: Getting Help from Coworkers, Supervisors, Or Friends**

***c. Stress Management Training and Emotional Support***

68% of the police officers agreed that stress management training and emotional support from the department/unit could reduce their stress compared to 32% (figure 4.5) of the remaining police officers. Furthermore, according to Santa Maria, Wolter, Gusy, Kleiber, and Renneberg (2021), the training program provides a specific tool for rewarding officers who take steps to manage their stress, support a co-worker under challenging times, or challenge the department's social climate that discourages and stigmatizes seeking help.



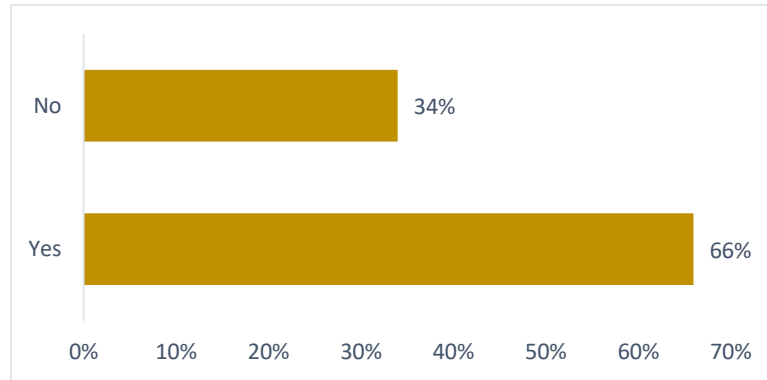
**Figure 4.5: Training and Emotional Support**

***Conflict***

***Causes of Conflict***

***a. Ineffective communication***

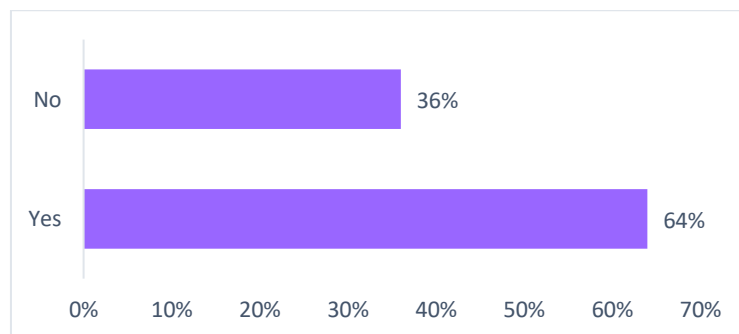
For the question, did poor communication problems during COVID-19 between co-workers and supervisors cause conflict in the workplace, 66% of the police officers agreed compared to 34% (figure 4.6) of the remaining police officers. According to Schafer (2010), one-quarter of police officers said unsuccessful leaders lacked sufficient communication skills, such as an inability to comprehend the human needs and motives of individuals they attempted to influence.



**Figure 4.6: Ineffective communication**

***b. Personality Differences***

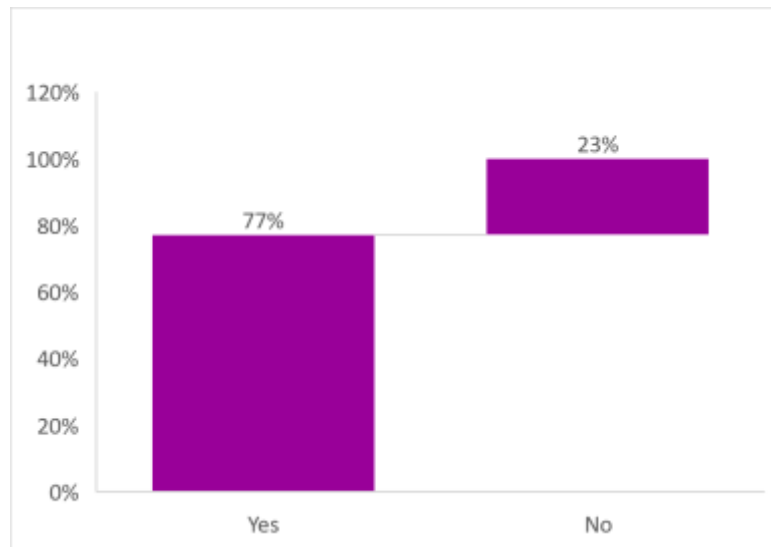
For the question, do different values/beliefs between co-worker’s cause conflict in the workplace (including generation conflicts = examples gen-x, gen-y, gen-XY, etc.; 64% of the police officers agreed compared to 36% (figure 4.7) of the remaining officers. In their responsibilities, police officers are exposed to a variety of potentially stressful circumstances and incidents. These can create severe personal discomfort, resulting in mood and psychological functioning changes in the near term. According to some academics, police officers develop several traits during their careers, such as cynicism, aloofness, suspiciousness, and estrangement, that help them cope with the rigors of their professions (Evans, Coman & Stanley, 1992).



**Figure 4.7: Personality Differences**

***c. Constraints in Resource***

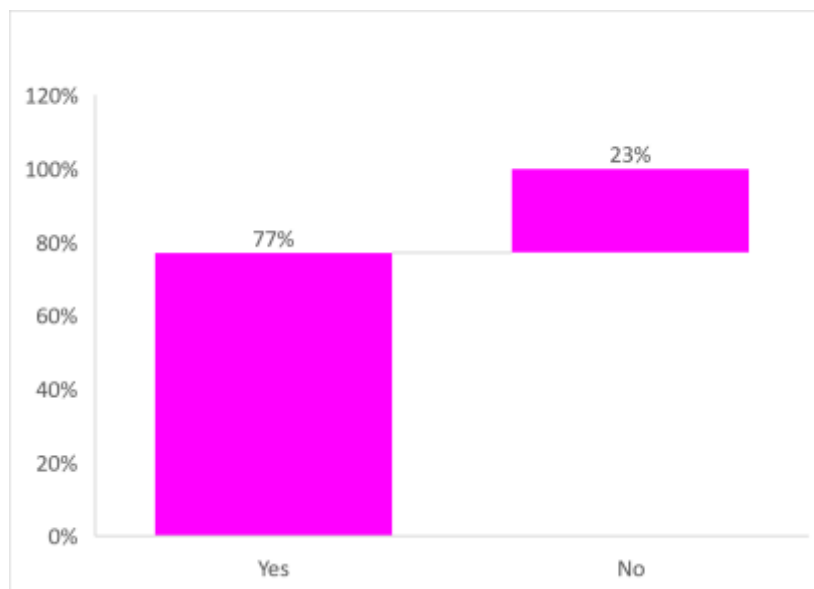
77% of the police officers agreed that conflict increase if there are constraints in resource use in the workplace (Examples of sharing resources and tasks with friends, lack of tools, work equipment, and other resources) compared to 23% (figure 4.8) of the remaining police officers. Frank, Lambert, and Qureshi (2016) empirically tested the job demands-resources model's applicability to explain levels of work stress reported by a sample of Indian police personnel. The impact of five job demands and four job resources on work stress was investigated using survey data obtained from 827 officers in the Indian state of Haryana. Their data reveal that role ambiguity, conflict, and overload are linked to increased officer stress, but organizational support, formalization, and employee input in decision-making are linked to reduced stress.



**Figure 4.8: Constraints in Resource**

**d. Unclear Instructions/Work Rules**

66% of the police officers agreed that supervisors' or superiors' unclear instructions/work rules during the COVID-19 pandemic caused uncertainty and conflict in the workplace compared to 34% (figure 4.9) of the remaining police officers. Executive officers were stressed by unfiltered, continuously changing information and imprecise, conflicting directions on the governmental and organizational levels, according to a study by Frenkel, Giessing, Egger-Lampl, Hutter, Oudejans, Kleygrewe, Jaspert & Plessner (2021). This ambiguity in knowledge resulted in a lack of confidence in action, preventing a self-assured and proper intervention.



**Figure 4.9: Unclear Instructions/Work Rules**



## Conflict Management in the Workplace

### a. Finding A Solution

93% of the police officers agreed that in handling conflicts throughout COVID-19, they would assess the problems encountered first before finding a solution that can satisfy all parties compared to 7% (figure 4.10) of the remaining police officers.

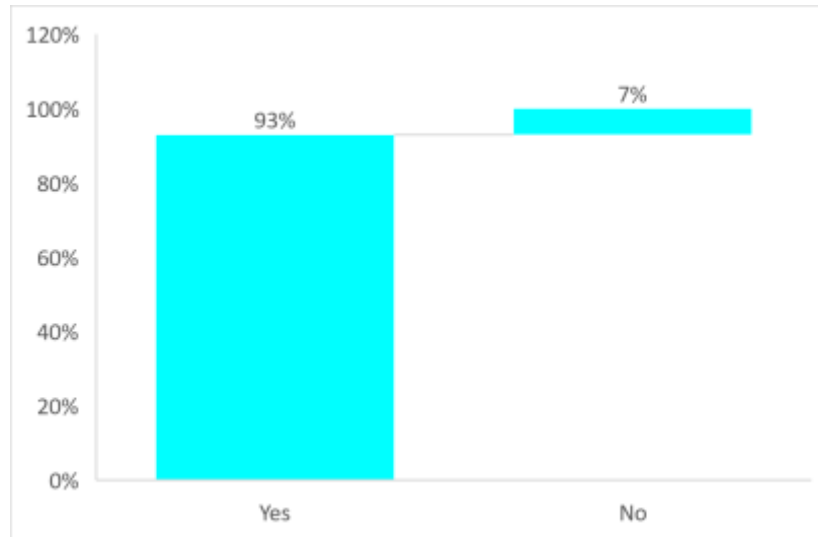


Figure 4.10: Finding A Solution

### b. Biased Decisions

83% of the police officers did not agree in handling workplace conflicts throughout the COVID-19 period; they prefer to make decisions in their favor (biased decisions) compared to 17% (figure 4.11) of the remaining police officers.

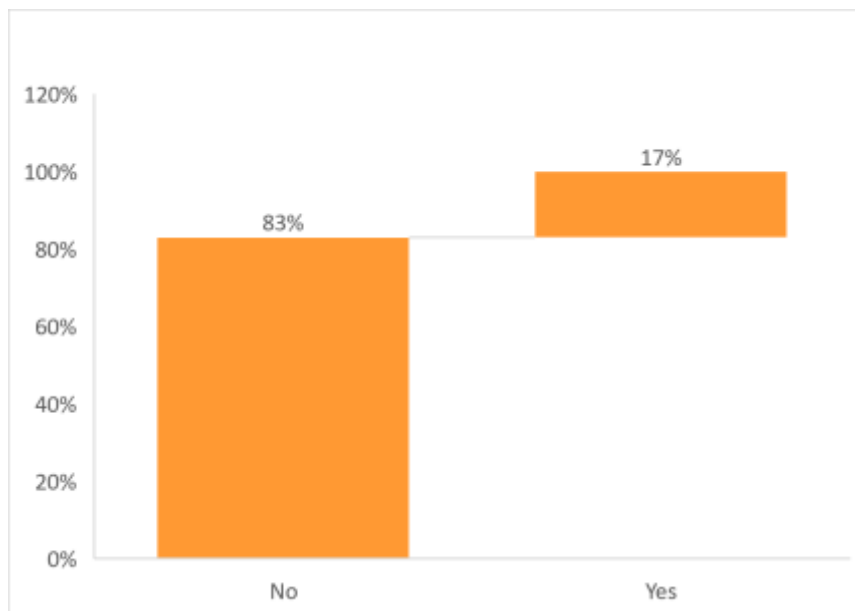
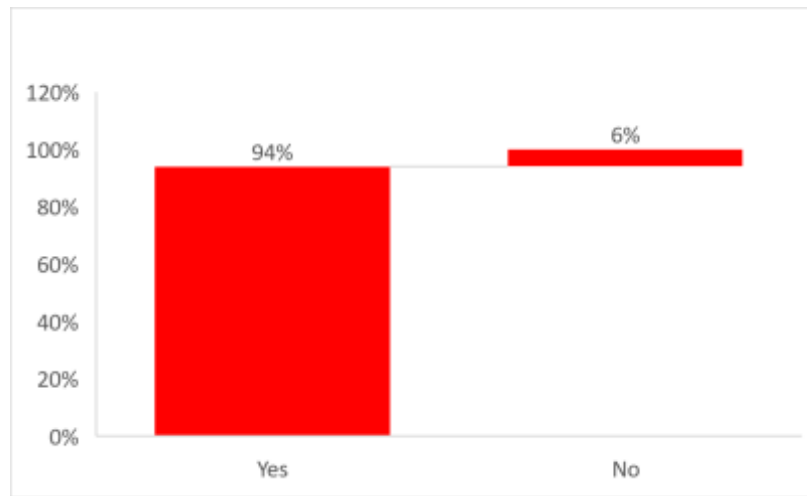


Figure 4.11: Biased Decisions

### c. To Avoid Quarrels or Avoid Differences of Opinion

94% of the police officers agreed that in handling conflicts throughout COVID-19, they prefer to avoid quarrels or avoid differences of opinion with colleagues/supervisors/superiors in

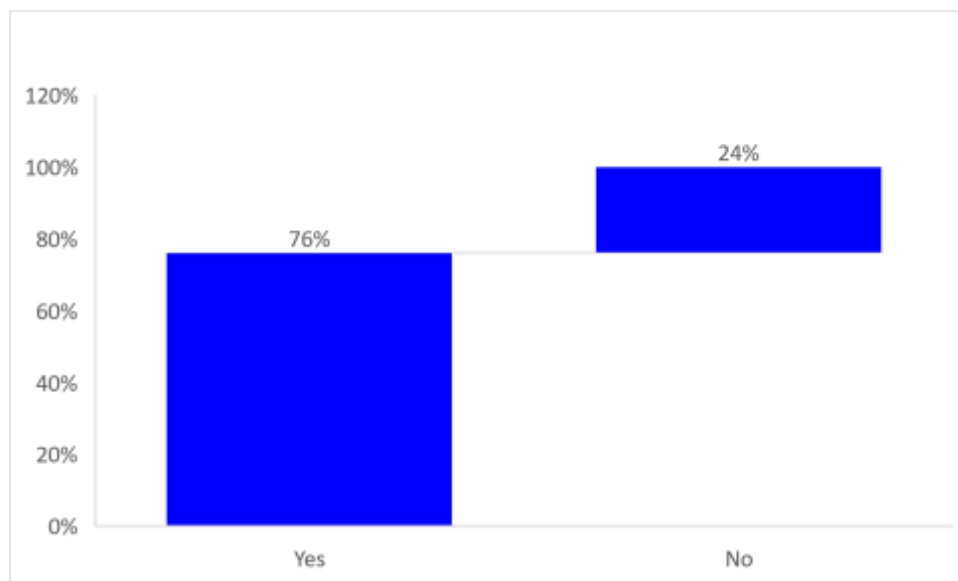
dealing with conflicts that occur during the COVID-19 period compared to 6% (figure 4.12) of the remaining police officers.



**Figure 4.12: Avoid Quarrels or Avoid Differences of Opinion**

***d. Opinions of Colleagues/Supervisors/Superiors***

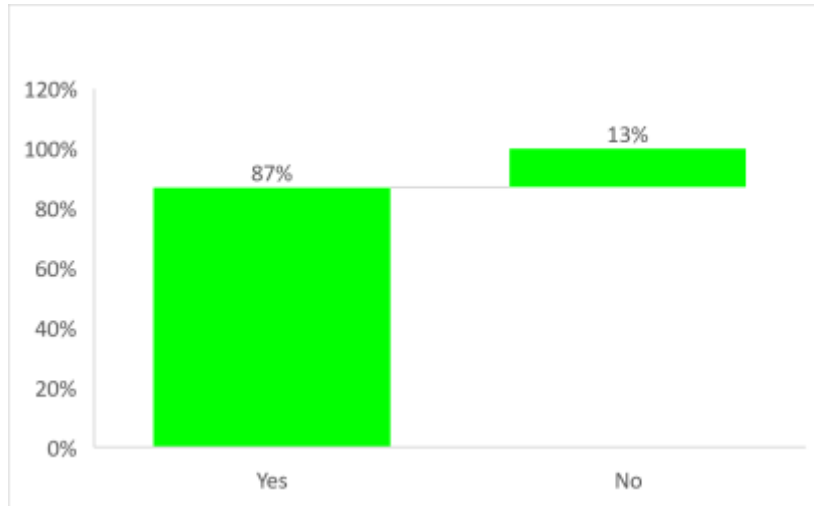
76% of the police officers agreed with the decisions or opinions of colleagues/supervisors/superiors in conflict management during the pandemic period compared to 24% (figure 4.13) of the remaining police officers.



**Figure 4.13: Opinions of Colleagues/Supervisors/Superiors**

***e. 50:50 Solution/Win-Win Situation***

87% of the police officers agreed that conflicts in the workplace during the COVID-19 period could be resolved through tolerance and consultation with various parties (50:50 solution/win-win situation) compared to 13% (figure 4.14) of the remaining police officers.

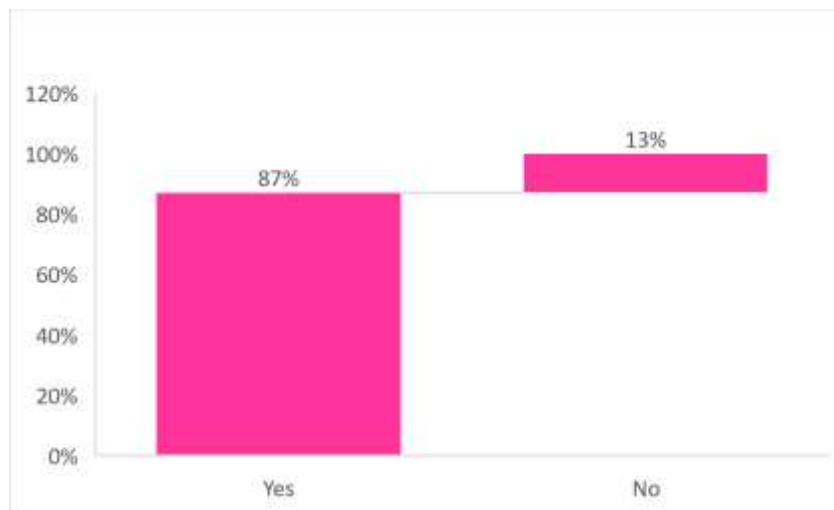


**Figure 4.14: 50:50 Solution/Win-Win Situation**

Among **FIVE (5)** conflict management in the workplace, the best strategy agreed by the police officers prefers to avoid quarrels or avoid differences of opinion with colleagues/supervisors/superiors in dealing with conflicts that occur during the COVID-19.

***Impact of Conflict***

87% of the police officers agreed that conflicts encountered in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic could cause disciplinary problems among police officers compared to 13% (figure 4.15) of the remaining police officers. Similar to the impact on stress, the impact of conflict also can cause disciplinary problems among police officers in Petaling Jaya District Police Headquarters.



**Figure 4.15: Disciplinary Problems**

**Conclusion**

The tasks assigned to the police officers since the COVID-19 pandemic have put more work pressure on them than before. Near half of the respondents agreed that the police officers feel more depressed since the COVID-19 pandemic and their workload. Almost half of the respondents agree that since the COVID-19 pandemic, financial problems have been the stressors. Some police officers also felt more stressed with their supervisors/superiors or

colleagues. Almost all the police officers agreed that by identifying the source of stress at work, they could control it better.

Moreover, more than half of the police officers agreed that their coworkers, supervisors, or friends could help manage their stress. Besides, police officers agreed that stress management training and emotional support from the department/unit could reduce their stress. Furthermore, most police officers agreed that poor communication problems and different values/beliefs during COVID-19 between coworkers and supervisors could cause conflict in the workplace. Constraints in resource used in the workplace and unclear instructions also can be caused by conflict agreed by the majority of the police officers. Among five conflict management in the workplace, the best strategy agreed by the police officers prefers to avoid quarrels or differences of opinion with colleagues/supervisors/superiors in dealing with conflicts that occur during the COVID-19. Similar to the impact on stress, the impact of conflict also can cause disciplinary problems among police officers in Petaling Jaya District Police Headquarters.

The limitation of this study is that many police officers have not answered the online questionnaire. The gap between males and females who answered the online questionnaire is also relatively high. As for future studies, there is a need for qualitative studies to understand more about the potential source of stress and causes of conflict. There is also a need to explore a possible solution to issues of stress and conflict among police officers. These studies are essential to ensure that our country can achieve SDGs, as highlighted by the UN.

### **Acknowledgement**

This research is made possible by the support of the Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies (FSPPP), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Grant Number: 600-ICAEN/FIRG-01/2021)

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