

The Bill Blackwood
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The Costs of wearing the Uniform: Health, Mind, and Body

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ABSTRACT

In the modern world citizens have come to expect our government to provide many services. On the local level, one of those services is law enforcement. Taxpayers expect the police to respond to calls made by the public and handle many of life's undesirables, which include everything from speeding cars to the most gruesome crime scene. Police officers are such professionals that the public rarely gets to see the other side of life endured by police officers. Police officers today suffer in silence and as a result tend to have difficulty and internalize job related stress. Subsequently, little is being done to teach alternate methods of dealing with the issues and atrocities seen by law enforcement officers. This internalization of stress tends to, with time, cause a normal, healthy person to break down and develop health and relationship problems. The author believes that the police profession has not placed enough emphasis on a healthy lifestyle and offer the availability of professional help so that officers can deal with the things they see and do during their career. The author conducted a large amount of research (coupled with two surveys) which seeks to confirm or deny the belief that the law enforcement profession does not emphasize the importance of a healthy lifestyle and offer professional help. The results found that law enforcement has taken great strides in this arena and police officers are learning the important of a healthy lifestyle and that it is acceptable to seek help as needed. The results indicate that there is still room for improvement, however progress is being made.

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INTRODUCTION

The law enforcement community has basically ignored the issues of police suicide, high divorce rates and health problems due to stereotyping. Police officers are taught early on through movies, television, public perception and while in the academy that police officers should be tough and any emotion is a sign of weakness. In the academy officers are taught how to catch bad guys, interpret law, but not deal with the horrible things officers see and experience. If law enforcement will address these issues while the new officer is in the academy and make them a part of the training, future officers can reduce their risks of suicide and be able to deal with the horrors they experience as police officers. The rewards will be huge and officers will live longer, be healthier, more responsive to the community, and able to sustain a meaningful family relationship.

Every twenty-two hours a police officer commits suicide. Has the average citizen ever wondered what price an officer pays for choosing a career in law enforcement? Does the public ever consider what being a law enforcement officer does to the family life, mental health, and well being of that individual? Any law enforcement officer who has been on the job for any length of time has read about or known of someone that is a police officer who has been divorced (sometimes more than once), thought of suicide, or has extensive health problems (cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes). As a profession, law enforcement has above average rates of divorce, medical problems, and suicide as compared to the general public. Most agencies will more likely encounter police suicide before encountering an officer killed in the line of duty.

The author asks why divorce rates are higher and what can be done about it? The first step will be an examination of the rates of suicide, divorce, and health problems as they relate to law enforcement. This will be accomplished by the review of medical research in these areas.

Once the rates are examined, the author intends to conduct a survey of officers in an effort to learn what various departments are or not doing to reduce these issues.

The author anticipates that the research will reveal that law enforcement is doing very little to reduce or prevent suicide, divorce and/or poor health conditions from happening. The author believes limited attention is paid to these areas under the title critical incident debriefing. Law enforcement has been behind in handling these sensitive issues. Addressing these issues will produce healthier police officers who will yield immense rewards in both their personal and professional lives. Officers will be able to deal with the horrors they encounter, have a long healthy retirement, and be more effective in assisting victims of tragedy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The author has reviewed a large amount of research concerning the issues of police suicide, divorce, and health problems. The most significant research in this area has been conducted by John M. Violanti. Violanti's research indicates that police officers tend to have significant health problems the longer they are police officers. Officers have increased rates for cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease and other diseases. The research found significant increases in the rates for certain cancers among the group studied. The group was found to have increased risks for cancers of the liver and colon, the highest mortality ratios for heart disease in younger ages (30-34, 35-39, and 40-44 years of age). The data suggests that there is a direct relation to stress and cancer.

The data indicates that for about the first nine years of service officers health is relatively unaffected by police work. This is attributed to the relative youth of the officers and their overall good health when selected. The data indicated that after the nine years of service, most officers show a higher risk of suffering from cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease and other diseases

and these risks increase steadily after 40 years of employment. With the increased risks it was found that officers had a higher mortality rate than other occupations. Basically, police officers were dying at a younger age than other people. The research did show in the *Normative Aging Study* (conducted in Washington State) that the same was not true for a group of very healthy veteran officers who had participated in this study. In a review of the data from Washington State it was discovered that a small group had different results than the other participants. Upon further investigation it was found that a small group of officers exercised regularly and therefore offset the effects of stress further validating the importance of being physically fit.

One common theme in all of the research denotes that officers who take steps to reduce or deal with on-the-job stress are more productive, healthier, have better family situations, and deal with the public better. Officers who are unable to deal with job related stress will eventually force the department to deal with his/her stress induced problems. The department becomes affected by poor productivity, alcoholism, low morale and an increased use of sick leave. This does not include the complaints of rudeness, excessive use of force, civil lawsuits, or suicide.

The literature also indicates some conflicting views on whether the stress of police work in fact causes higher rates of divorce. A study conducted in 1982 by John and Barbara Stratton found that in the 1980's, 40-60% of all marriages ended in divorce. The study concluded that law enforcement divorce rates were not higher than the 40-60% rate. A study conducted by Goldfarb found that the divorce rate was anywhere from 60-75% making the rate 25% higher than the national average. The author believes that whether or not police work causes higher rates of divorce is still in question due to the lack of a consistent in-depth study in this area.

The author proposes that the literature indicates that police service related stress and lack of training are major causes for police suicide. The literature reveals that when stress generates

the feeling that officers have lost control and have no where to turn, suicide becomes a real option. According to Anderson (2002), there are ten early warning signs that tend to indicate the possibility that an officer might be contemplating committing suicide. They are: personal and financial problems for which the officer feels there are no solutions, an increase in alcohol use, work related problems, a divorce or break-up of a relationship, an increase in sick days, mood swings, depression, a recent death in the family, the exposure to work related trauma, and the use of deadly force.

Police officers are taught through the academy and peer pressure that to show any type of emotion is a weakness and is not tolerated in the profession. Officers often turn to alcohol to relieve stress and dull the emotional pain that accompanies their profession. There is also the fear of ridicule by their peers if any signs of weakness become apparent. The officer being trained that the use of firearms is the final option sometimes use that very weapon (which is the symbol of their profession) to take there own life. Officers are not routinely trained to recognize the warning signs of depression and suicidal tendencies. When they do recognize the signs, they are reluctant to say anything because of the fear that if they are wrong they may have harmed a fellow officer's career.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research proposes to answer why police officers have higher rates of health problems, divorce, and suicide. The second part of the research seeks to understand what police agencies are doing about these areas of concern. The author believes that the research will indicate that these concerns are not being addresses by police agencies and that police agencies should do more to inform their officers about these hazards.

The author believes that the best method to see the current status of these concerns is to conduct a survey among police officers. The survey consists of two parts, with the first being a survey of fellow class members in module II and the second part was to survey members of the author's agency. The first survey is utilized because it will survey officers from a large number of police agencies that ranged in size from large to small. The second survey will be on police officers from the Victoria Police Department. This survey should help in the obtainment of more information on the officers current health conditions, and consider whether they even had any health conditions as listed on the survey. Ideally, the group will also be readily accessible if additional questions on the survey should arise.

The two groups to be surveyed are comprised of a total of thirty-nine persons. The module II group includes nineteen persons and the Victoria Police Department group includes twenty persons. The groups will each be given a questionnaire to answer. The questionnaire asks about the persons age, sex, number of years in law enforcement, current health status, whether they had any of the listed medical conditions such as: high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and kidney problems, do they exercise and if they do how many times per week, how they rated the stress level at work, and if they had any marital problems, frequent relationship changes, or divorce since becoming police officers. The last part of the questionnaire inquires as to whether the individual's agency offers counseling services and if they do, whether or not the individual (taking the survey) has ever utilized the service.

The survey is designed to obtain information to verify whether or not officers were having health problems, marital problems, and to see if counseling services were available. This information will then be able to be used to support whether or not officers might be at risk for committing suicide.

The survey will be analyzed using the basis of the Violanti survey. In this survey the officers' health is broken down into categories based on the number of years of service the police officer had served. The goal will be to model the age groups after the Violanti survey and see if the survey officers began experiencing health problems due to a longer, extended service in law enforcement.

FINDINGS

Through the surveys, the author found that the returned questionnaires could be divided into several sub groups so that the data could be reviewed. The group was divided into the following groups: the module II group, the VPD group, and then combined into the groupings as outlined in the Violanti survey. The author will first review the data gathered from combining both groups (Module II and VPD). The survey had a 100% return which totaled thirty-nine respondents. The respondents ranged in experience from one year to thirty eight years. The age range of the respondents was from the lower twenties to fifty-nine years old. The survey, therefore, gathered data from several generations. This allowed the author to see if there was a generational influence on the data. The findings were reviewed as both all inclusive and then in divisions. The survey group had male respondents comprising 77% (30) of the group and women 23% (9) of the group. This result is very typical as law enforcement is predominately male with a smaller group of women.

The next area covered how the respondents viewed their own health. They were able to select from three ratings which included: poor, good and excellent. There was not a single person who selected the "poor" rating to describe their health, with the majority (82%) choosing a rating of "good" to describe their health. There were several respondents (18%) who rated their health as "excellent". This area was totally subjective for the group from the Victoria

Police Department. However, the module II group had just been subjected to their wellness test prior to completing the survey, but the results had not been given to the class. However, it is felt that this group probably was more informed about their health when the survey was completed and were therefore able to reasonably and accurately report their health status.

Surprisingly, no one selected “poor” to describe their individual health. It was surprising that neither the person who had cancer nor the person with diabetes felt that these illnesses caused them to feel as if their health was “poor” and the conclusion drawn from this is that with proper health care and early detection, there is no reason these illnesses should indicate a person is in “poor” health.

The next part of the survey was for the respondents to select whether or not they had any of the following health issues such as: high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and kidney problems. The major health issue detected was that 18% of those surveyed had high blood pressure. The results also detected the presence of both cancer and diabetes. Many of those surveyed had none of the health issues listed and thus supports the findings of a “good” health rating by the respondents.

The survey began with looking at how the respondents rated their own health and considering whether or not they had any major health issues and then turns toward examining exercise and stress concerns. The survey asked if the person exercised and if they did how many times per week. The majority responded that they did exercise. Those who reported that they did exercise, said they exercised anywhere from once a week to seven days a week. The most common amount of exercise was in the three to five times per week category. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this is that law enforcement personnel have recognized the value and importance that exercise plays in their job and overall health and well-being.

In the aforementioned survey, respondents were asked about stress and how each individual rated the level of stress in their life. There were selections among all three of the options (high, medium and low) with the most selected option regarding the level of an individual's stress being, "medium" (61.6%), "high" coming in second, and "low" coming in third. In looking at the results, over three quarters of the respondents indicated that their stress level was either low or medium.

The next area of data included the type of problems encountered since becoming a police officer. This was in the relationship area and examined whether or not the officer had marital problems, changed relationships frequently, and/or had one or more divorces. Each respondent could mark multiple times (per each question) and many experienced all of the selections. Of the thirty-nine surveyed, twenty-two respondents indicated that they had none of the relationship problems listed. The remaining survey participants listed marital problems as the most common problem, followed by divorce and frequent relationship changes. It should be noted that on one of the surveys, one individual had experienced three divorces since becoming a police officer. Although the survey did not ask about the number of times marital and relationship issues were faced, it does point to some insight regarding deeper issues that need to be explored in this area. The results indicate that police officers have a forty-three percent chance of experiencing some type of problems in their personal relationships, whether it is changing partners frequently, marital problems, and/or the issue of divorce. Unfortunately, some officers may experience these factors many times during their careers.

The last area considered whether the agency the officer works for offered counseling and if the agency does offer counseling services, did the officer utilize the counseling? The report found that 82% of the agencies had some type of counseling for its employees. The survey did

find that a small portion of agencies did not offer the service and a few employees did not know if counseling services were available. Of the agencies who had counseling available, only six individuals had actually used the service. The author believes that even though the importance of having counseling available has been recognized, the law enforcement profession has not overcome the stigma that using professional counseling services can be an indication that a person is weak. The stereotypical image is still in place, which suggests that police officers are tough and don't need help.

The survey as a whole has been covered in the aforementioned reported findings and will now separate into the two groups followed by the experience groups used by Violanti. The second group studied was from the author's agency. The survey was comprised of 20 questionnaires and had a 100 percent response rate. In reviewing the results from the Victoria Police Department (VPD) the make-up of the survey was slightly different in that the survey had a male to female ratio of 3 to 1. This group also rated their health in either the "good" or "excellent" with almost 90% selecting "good". On the health conditions, the major reported ailment was high blood pressure, with 20% followed by diabetes and 5% reporting cancer as an ailment. The majority of surveyed participants had no health issues.

When looking at the question regarding physical exercise, this group reported a majority (70%) of respondents as including exercise into their daily life. Some cities even pay gym membership dues for those in law enforcement who regularly exercise as an incentive to maintain good health. The stress level category had no respondents reporting a "high" level of stress with the largest (80 %) group of survey participants reporting a moderate to "medium" level of stress and 20 % reporting a "low" level of stress. In the relationship area, this group had almost an even selection between marital problems, frequent relationship problems and divorce

rates. Each category had four individuals who reported having three divorces and the largest group (12) reported having no overt relationship problems.

On the issue of departmental counseling, it was found that 75% reported the department offered counseling, 15% said there was no counseling offered and 10% selecting unknown. This group did have the highest use of counseling (30%). However, 70% did not use the available counseling services. The module II group was 79% male and 21% female and the majority had selected “good” to describe their health followed by “excellent”. The only health condition reported was high blood pressure (16%), while the majority had no health issue. The surveyed group reported 74% of the respondents as participating in exercise. The surveyed group faced a wide range of responses for the level of stress endured or felt by each individual reporting 47.4% as having “high” stress levels, and 42.1% as having “medium” stress levels, and 10.5% as having “low” levels of job related stress.

In reviewing the problems encountered in relationships, 63.2% of the respondents reported that they had some type of marital problems, relationship changes, or one or more divorces. Almost 90% of the police agencies offered counseling. Ten percent of the agencies offered no counseling and of those agencies who did offer counseling, only 5% of the officers took advantage of the available service. The last reviewed considered both groups combined and then reviewed using the experience groupings of 1-9 years, 10-19 years, and 20-29 plus years of service. This first group was the 1-9 years of experience. The group was made up of 56% male and 44% female. The group rated its health as “good” 78% of the time and “excellent” 22%, with no one selecting “poor”. The group had no health conditions reported and 78% exercised, while 22% did not.

The group did have responses in all of the stress level categories with “medium” coming in first with 67%, “low” coming in second with 22%, and “high” coming in last with 11% of the surveyed participants reporting some form of stress. The group did register some relationship difficulties (with frequent relationship changes and divorce surfacing) and the majority of respondents reported no relationship problems. The group advised that their department offered counseling, yet only 22% utilized the service.

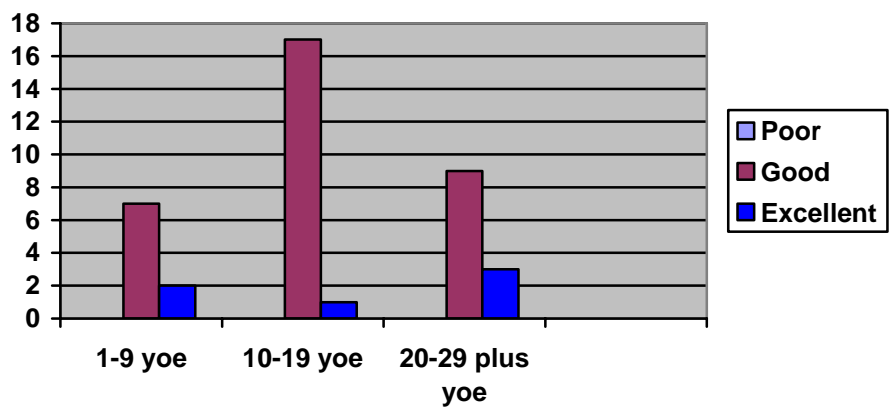
The next section considered officers with 10-19 years of experience, which was made up of 18 individuals. The majority of this group was 89% male and 11% female. The group rated their health as “good” 94% of the time and “excellent” 6% of the time. The group did have health conditions such as: high blood pressure (17%), diabetes (6%), and a majority of the respondents reported no health issues.

The group was committed to exercise as indicated by 66.6% affirming they exercised. the group reported their stress level among all the categories with the responses being “high” 27.4%, “medium” 66.6%, and “low” 6%. The group had all of the aforementioned relationship issues and was equal between marital problems, frequent relationship changes, and divorce, all of which had a 22% response. Only 34% of the respondents reported no relation issues. Therefore, the surveyed group had 66% who did experience some type of relationship difficulty.

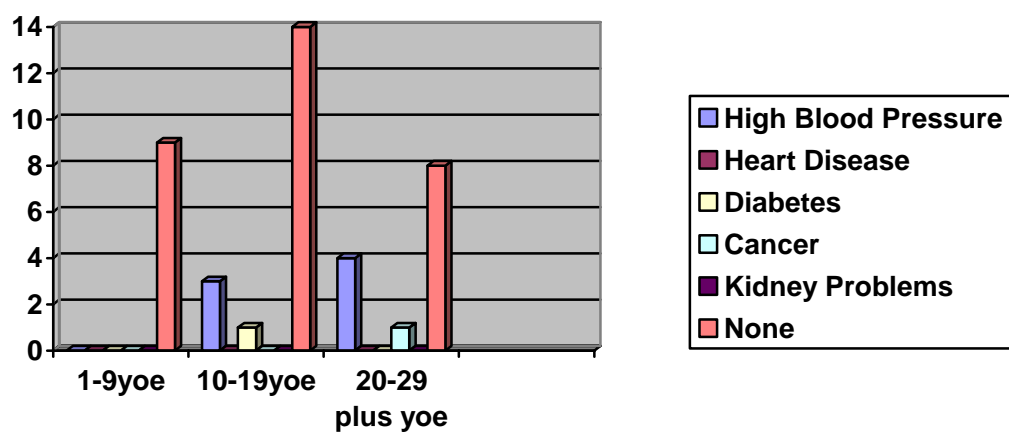
Seventy-seven percent of the agencies offered counseling, while 11.5% did not. The remaining officers did not know if their agencies had counseling available. The group did use the service 27.4% of the time, while 72.6% of the time they did not. The last experience group was the 20-29 plus years of service, which had 12 individuals. As with the other groups, this group was mainly male (75%) and 25% female. Again, no one rated their health as “poor”, while the remaining respondents choose “good” (75%) to describe their health, and 25% reported

“excellent” health. The group had health issues such as: high blood pressure (33%) and for the first time cancer (1%). The remaining respondents (8) had no major health concerns.

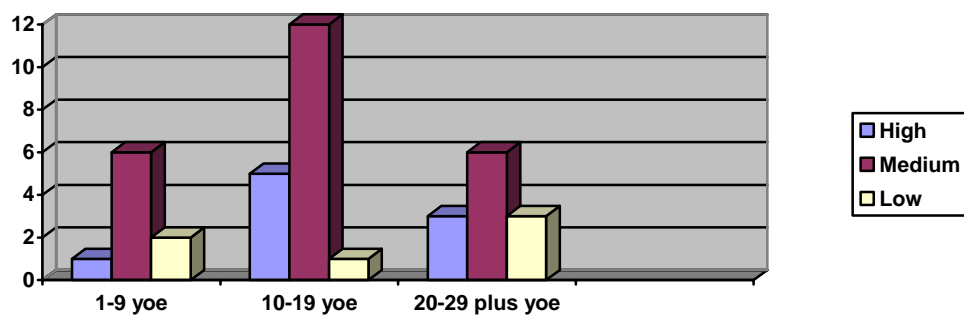
The group participated in physical exercise 75% of the time while 25% did not. The stress levels reported was equal between “high” and “low” (25%). However, the largest response regarding stress was “medium” with 50%. The group reported relationship problems with half having either a divorce, marital problems or frequent relationship changes. Seventy-five percent of the agencies offered counseling, yet none of the respondents utilized this resource.



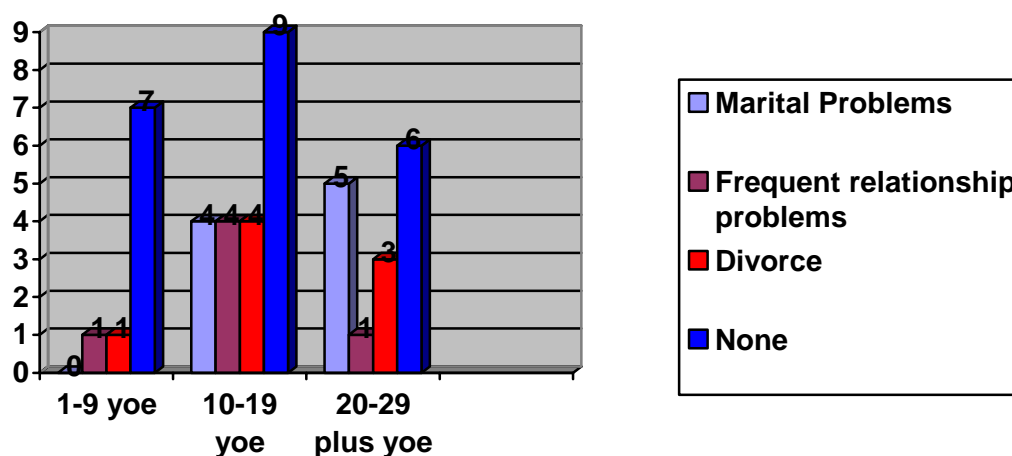
Current Health



Health Conditions



Stress Level



Relationships

CONCLUSIONS

The author believes that many law enforcement agencies are not doing enough to combat the problems of bad health, police suicide, and did not offer any type of counseling to assist officers in dealing with the stresses encountered on the job. The belief was based on the fact that police officers had above average medical health issues, relationship problems, all being a result of stress from the occupation. These factors all contribute to suicide among police at higher levels.

The survey was able to shed light on many of these issues, the exception being police suicide. The survey was based using the experience groups used by Violanti in his mortality study. This study indicated that the longer a person was in the police service, the higher the mortality rate. The author's survey found that medical issues increased from zero reported conditions in the 1-9 (years of service) group and progressed upward to 23% in the 10-19 (years of service) group and rose finally to 34% in the 20-29 plus (years of service) group. This would

tend to confirm that the longer one stays in law enforcement, the more likely medical risks will increase.

The author also addressed why police officers have a high divorce rate. The survey indicated that a mere 22% of the officers had relationship problems in the 1-9 (years of service) group. However, in the 10-19 (years of service) group, 66% had relationship problems before descending slightly to 50% for the 20-29 plus (years of service) group. One conclusion that can be drawn here is that stress might have played a large role in the relationship problems endured by the surveyed officers. The 10-19 (years of service) group also had the highest percentage of respondents who indicated that their stress level was high. The survey found that the majority of the police agencies did recognize the need to provide some type of counseling to the officers. There were still some agencies who were not aware of the need for counseling services and the profession needs to encourage this as a standard that is provided by all agencies both large and small. As law enforcement moves into the 21st century, the stereotypes must end and an acceptance must assert that officers are human and need to adopt strategies that will aid them in the profession.

The last issue to address, police suicide, is possibly the hardest because it is not freely discussed in main stream law enforcement. The survey did not deal with the subject of police suicide, but it did provide some insight. Beverly Anderson wrote an article on police suicide and found that some of the major factors that lead to police officer suicide were marital and relationship problems. If this is true then the survey revealed that the risk for officers to be susceptible to police suicide is very real.

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Appendices

1. Your Age_____
2. Sex M F (circle one)
- 3 Years in Law Enforcement_____
4. How would you rate your current health: Poor Good Excellent
5. Do you have any of the following conditions: Check all that apply
 - High Blood Pressure_____
 - Heart Disease _____
 - Diabetes _____
 - Cancer _____
 - Kidney Problems _____
6. Do you exercise? Yes or No If Yes how often per week_____
7. How would you rate your stress level on the job:
 - High Medium Low
8. Since becoming a police officer has this caused:
 - Marital Problems _____
 - Frequent relationship changes _____
 - Divorce _____
9. Does your department offer any counseling services? Yes or No
 - If yes have you ever utilized the service? Yes or No