IMPACTS OF POLICING STRESS ON OFFICER HEALTH

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Health effects of psychosocial stress in first responders.

Stress in Firefighters

- Systematic review composed of 28 articles
- Work-related psychosocial stressors produced poor health outcomes such as changes in rates of:
  - mental health problems/burnout
  - alcohol use disorders
  - poor sleep quality
  - physiological parameters
  - somatic disorders
- Recommendations
  - focus on promoting self-esteem, enhancing self-efficacy, and strengthening social support

Motivations

- Police are likely to experience stressors from other first responders.
  - for example, health impacts of stress in policing tend to be trauma-centered

- Explore the nature of psychosocial stress in a sample of Canadian police officers to lay a foundation for future projects

STUDY DESIGN: AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH

Laying the foundation

The Waterloo Regional Police Service (WRPS)

- Municipality of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada
- WRPS oversees 3 cities and 5 townships, and encompasses 5 divisions
- Population: approx. 535,000

Online Survey sample: 50 officers

Survey - Organizational and Operational Police Stress

- Organizational Police stress scale
  - After each item, indicate how much stress it has caused you over the past 6 months:

	No stress at all (1)	(2)	(3)	Moderate stress (4)	(5)	(6)	A lot of stress (7)
Dealing with co-workers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Excessive administrative duties	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

- Operational Police stress scale
  - After each item, indicate how much stress it has caused you over the past 6 months:

	No stress at all (1)	(2)	(3)	Moderate stress (4)	(5)	(6)	A lot of stress (7)
Shift Work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Working alone at night	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Survey - Multidimensional Scale for Perceived Social Support

- For each statement, think back over the past 6 months and indicate how much you disagree, or agree:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
There was an important person who was around when I was in need.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
There was an important person with whom I could share my joys and sorrows.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Survey - General Health Questionnaire

- Presence of long-term diagnoses
  - respiratory disorders
  - gastrointestinal disorders
  - musculoskeletal disorders
  - hypertension
  - high cholesterol
  - Diabetes
  - mood disorders
  - Anxiety disorders

	Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to answer
a respiratory disorder (e.g., asthma, chronic bronchitis, or emphysema)	☐	☐	☐	☐
a gastrointestinal disorder (e.g., gastritis, peptic ulcer, or irritable bowel syndrome)	☐	☐	☐	☐

Survey - General health questionnaire

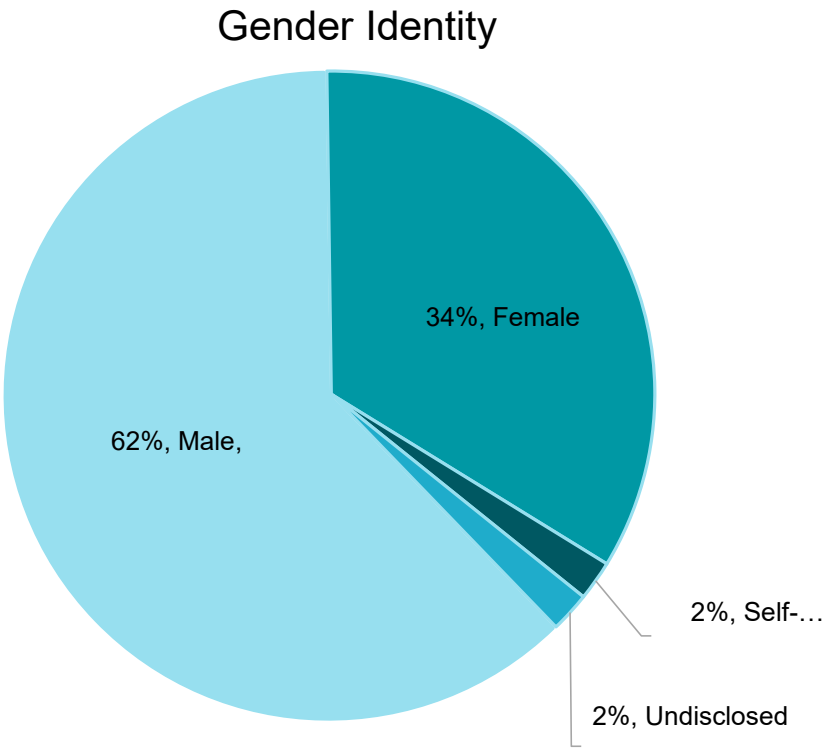
- Rates of behaviours
  - Sleep
  - Energy levels
  - Consumption of stimulants, depressants & pain relief medications
  - Smoking
  - Physical activity outside of work

- E.g., How often do you have trouble going to sleep, or staying asleep?
  - Never
  - Sometimes
  - Most of the time
  - All of the time
  - Do not know
  - Prefer not to answer

RESULTS

Exploration & Discovery

Demographics



50 Participants

Ethnicity

- Predominantly Caucasian (88%), with small representations of Black (4%), Southeast Asian (2%), and other backgrounds (6%)

Highest level of Education

- Majority held university degrees (58%), followed by college degrees (28%) and post-graduate degrees (10%).
  - In line with current police officer requirements

Stress

Top Organizational Stressors:

Stressor	Mean (SD)
Staff shortages	4.5 (1.0)
Bureaucratic Red Tape	4.5 (1.1)
Proving Yourself to the Organization	4.4 (1.3)
Excessive Administrative Duties	4.3 (1.1)
Inconsistent Leadership Style	4.3 (1.2)

Top Operational Stressors:

Stressor	Mean (SD)
Fatigue	3.8 (2.8)
organizational-related health issues	3.9 (2.2)
Negative comments from the public	3.9 (2.0)
Time constraints from friends and family	3.6 (2.0)
Managing social life outside of work	3.2 (2.0)

Organizational stressors are reported as more stressful than operational stressors

Social Support (MS-PSS)

Social support highlights

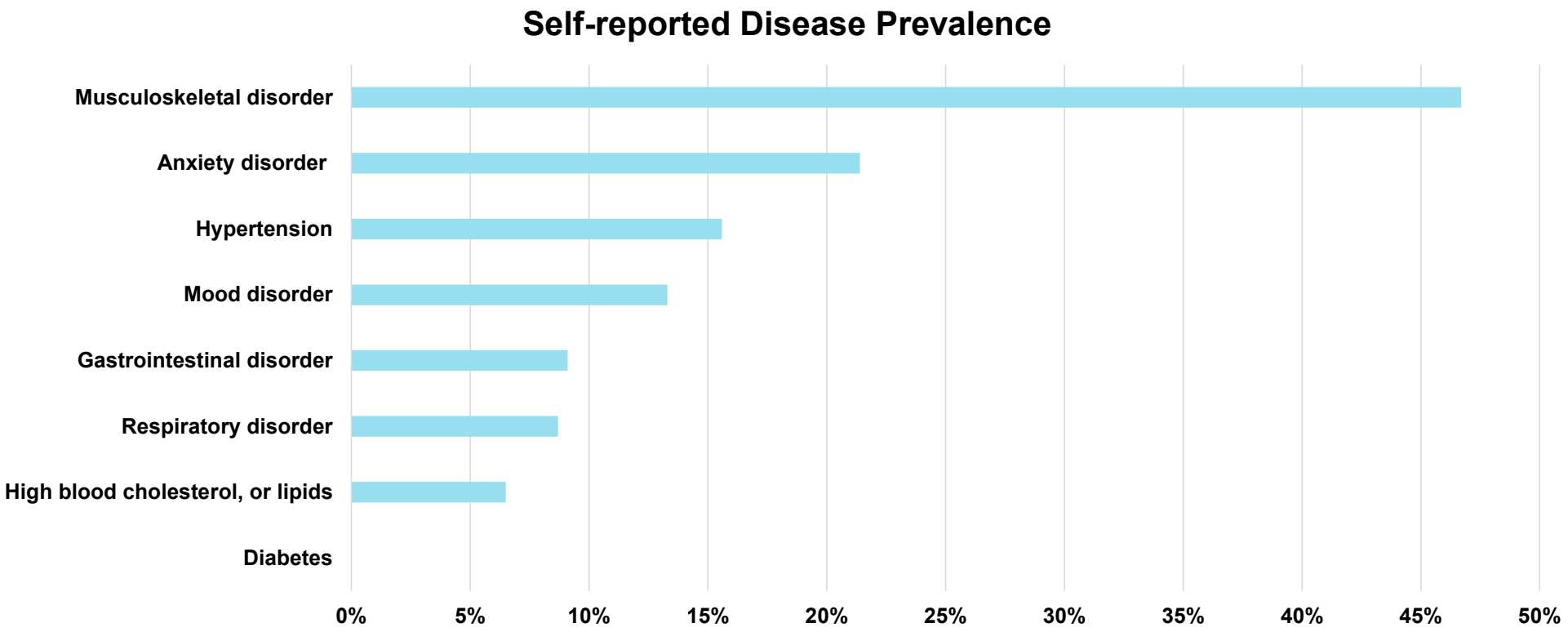
Measures of support	Mean (SD)
I have an important person who provides emotional comfort	4.4 (0.8)
I can count on my family when I need to talk	4.0 (1.1)
My friends really try to help me	3.8 (1.1)
I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me	4.8 (0.4)

Overall:

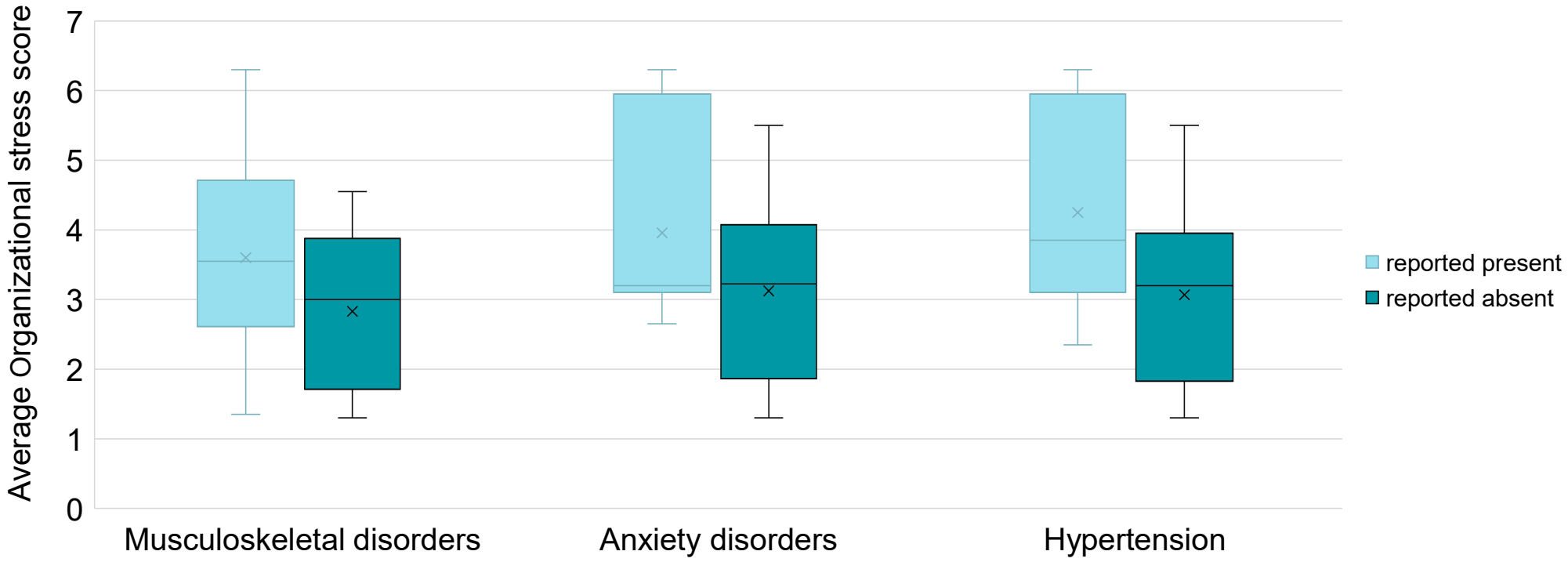
- Officers reported strong support networks across both scales
- Often social support networks were made among coworkers
  - Common understandings of life stressors

Strongly disagree (1) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Strongly agree (5)

Health Conditions (GHQ-12)

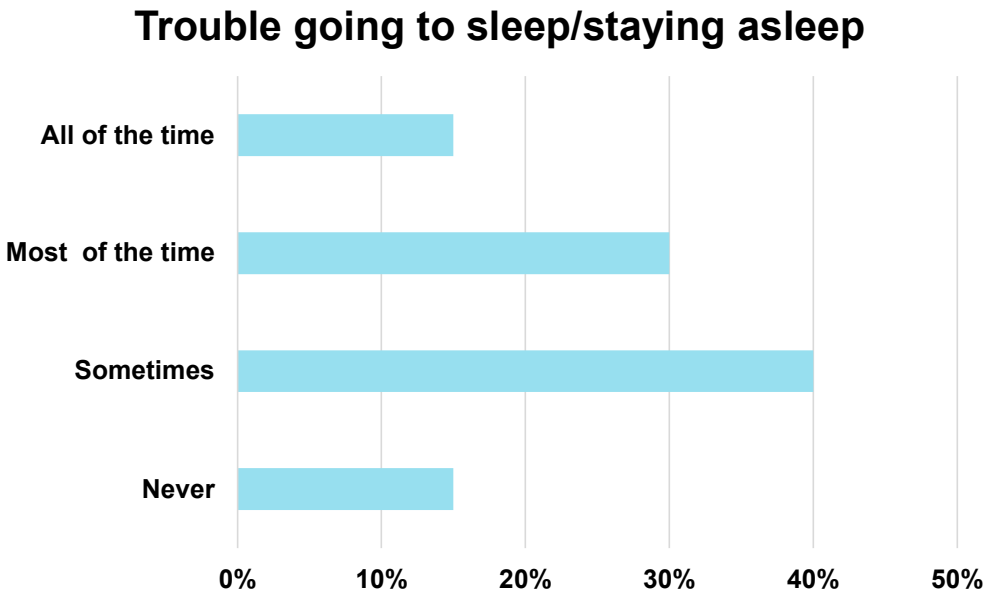


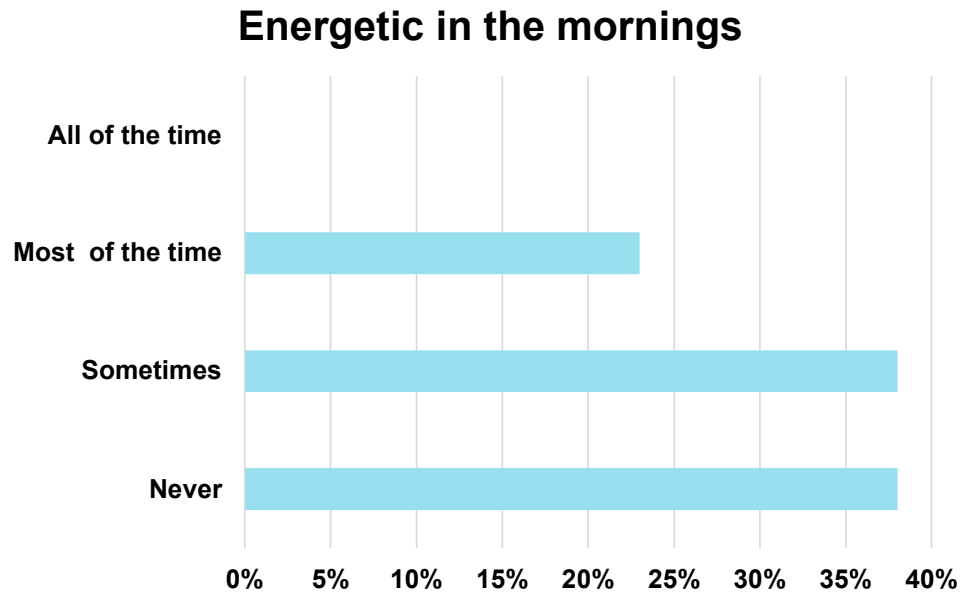
Health Conditions & Organizational Stress



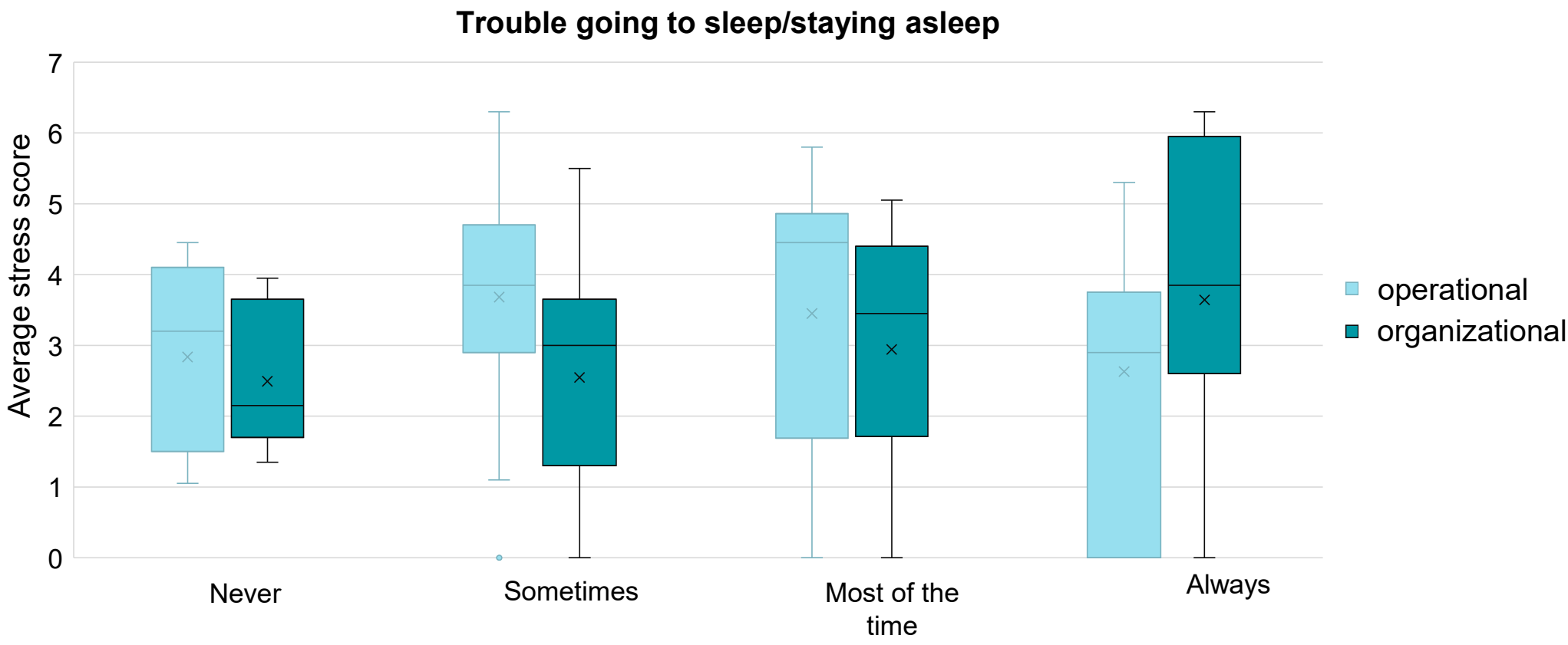
Sleep (GHQ-12)

- Majority of officers slept for the recommended 8 hours (65%), but many reported poor sleep quality

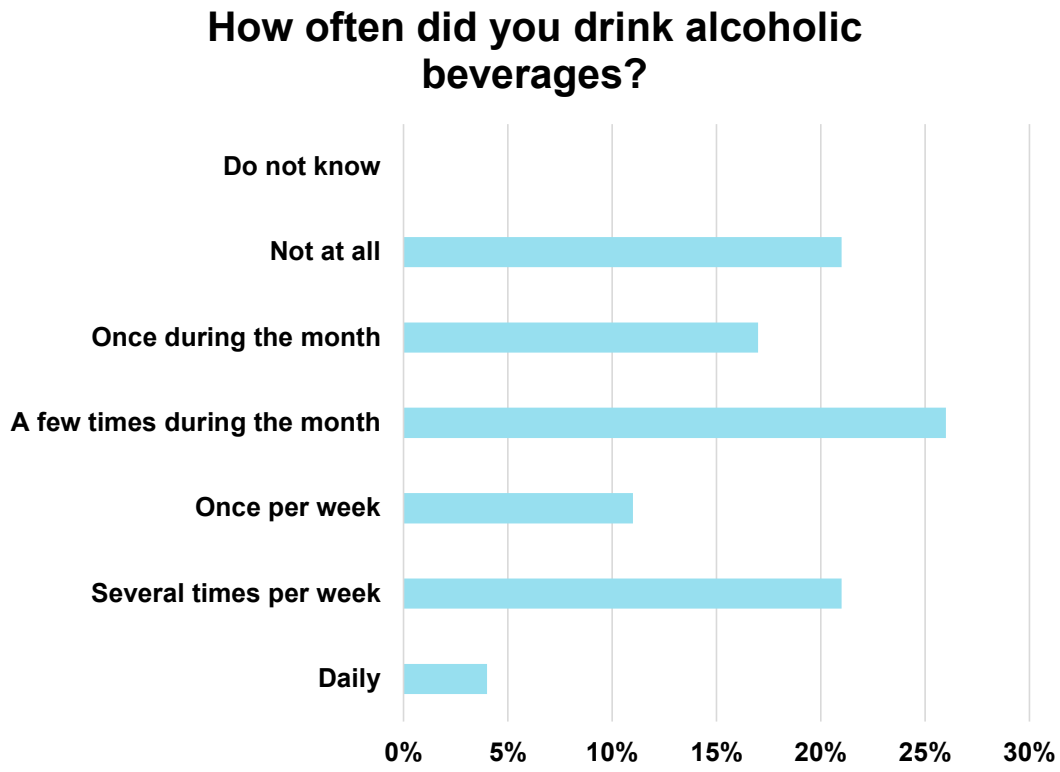


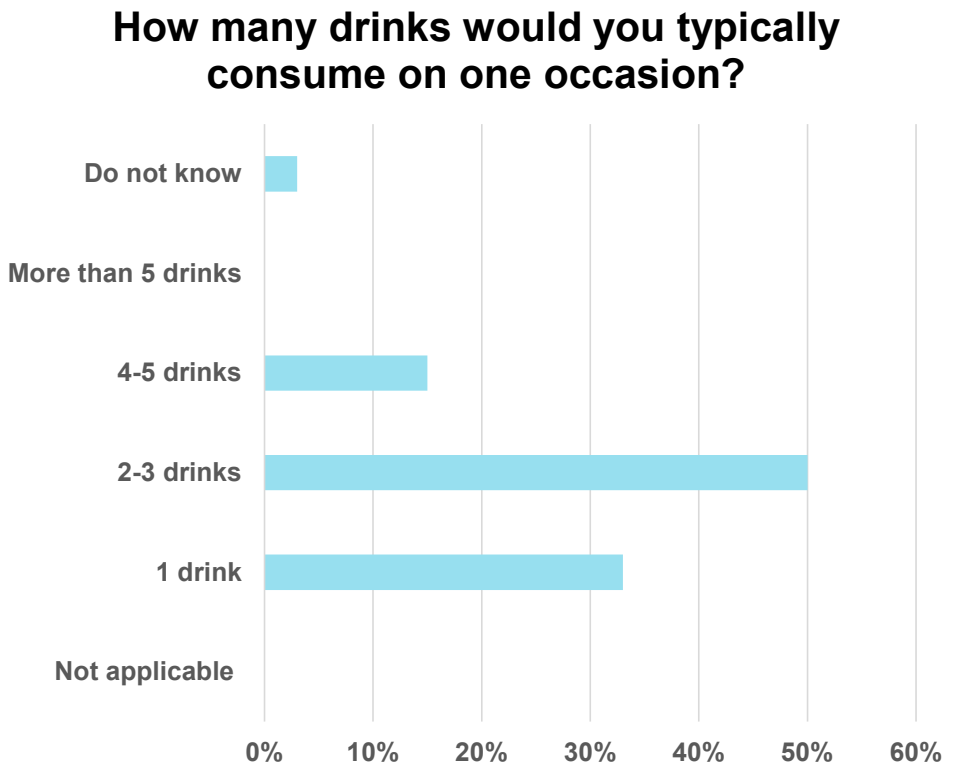


Sleep indicators & stress

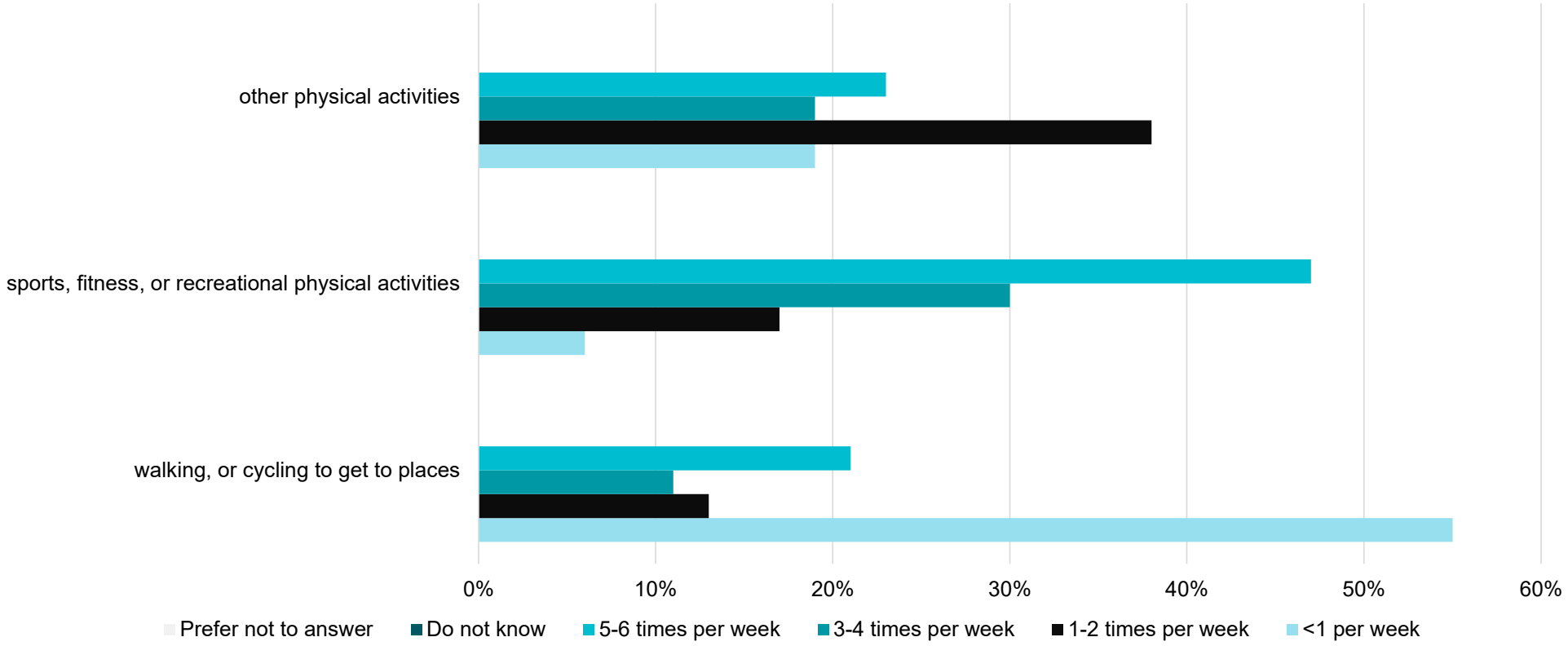


Alcohol Consumption (GHQ-12)

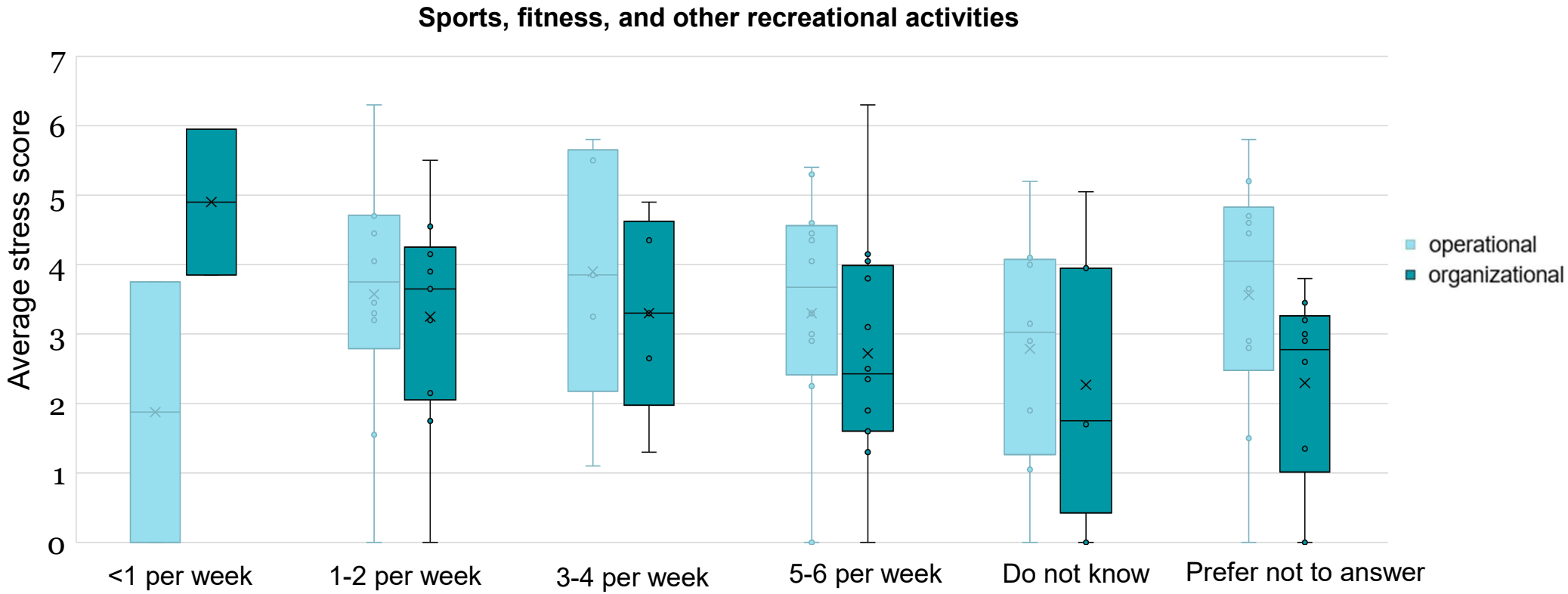




Health Behaviours (GHQ-12)



Coping Mechanisms & Stress



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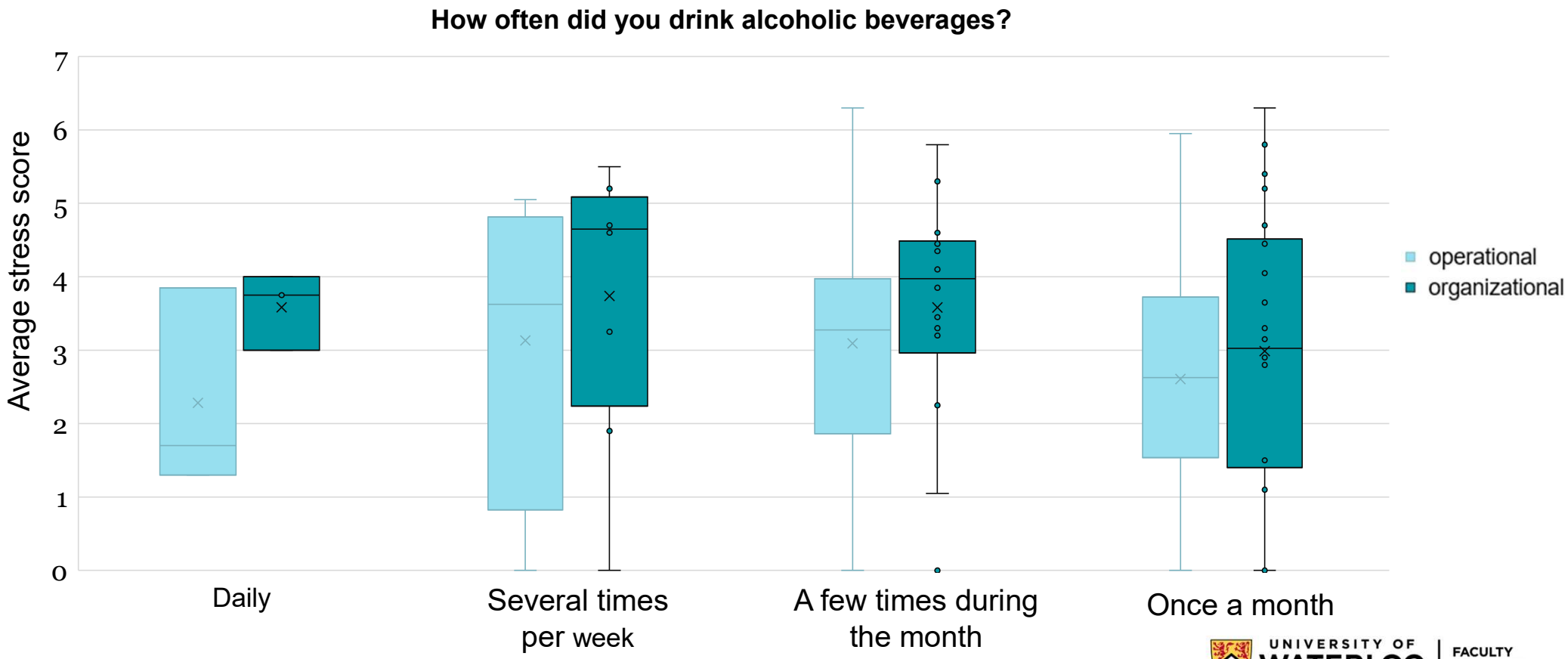

DISCUSSION

Meaning & Impact

Stress

- Controlling the environment of work
  - Lifting organizational burdens
    - simplifying procedures
    - assigning time for complex work tasks
    - externalizing administrative work when possible
  - Being a unified front
    - leadership with clear goals, expectations and communication

Coping Mechanisms

- Encouraging healthy coping mechanisms within the force
  - Organized recreational activities
    - sports
  - Developing protective social networks
    - social events
    - mentorship
- Target potentially harmful coping responses
  - substance dependence
  - isolationism

CONCLUSION

Final take aways

Key outcomes

- Organizational stressors > operational stressors
- Social support helps, but isn't sufficient to buffer all stressors
- Stress linked to poor sleep & mental health
- Workplace culture is a major driver of strain
- Supports research on culture & well-being
- Shift from resilience → organizational change
- Healthier officers = safer communities
- Leadership & workload are key levers

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