

Chapter 29

Preemployment Psychological Screening of Police Officer Applicants: Basic Considerations and Recent Advances

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ABSTRACT

The psychological screening of law enforcement officer applicants represents a core practice area in police psychology. Significant advances have been made in recent years regarding the development of practice guidelines and standards. This chapter provides an overview of the essential components of this specialized form of high-stakes psychological assessment. Important legal principles are highlighted and key resources are identified. The core steps in a contemporary screening model are described and the psychological self-report measures most widely used in psychological screenings are profiled. Factors impacting the validity and usefulness of psychological test results are discussed. The critical need for preemployment psychological screenings of police officer candidates to be culturally sensitive is addressed, as are some of the criticisms that have been identified in the literature. The chapter stresses the need for preemployment assessments of police officer candidates to be evidence-based, ethically attuned, and consistent with recent advances in police psychology.

INTRODUCTION

The preemployment psychological evaluation of law enforcement officer applicants represents one of the earliest real-world applications of modern psychological assessment. For nearly one hundred years psychologists in the United States have utilized their competence in assessment to contribute to the selection of public safety officers. One of the first examples is that of Terman (1917), who early in the 20th century conducted preemployment psychological evaluations of police and fire department applicants to

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explore whether this contributed to the effectiveness of selection. By 1939 the cities of Wilmington, DE and Toledo, OH were requiring preemployment mental and personality assessment of all law enforcement applicants (Gottesman, 1975). More recently a national survey of municipal police departments showed that over 90% required psychological assessment of all police officer recruits (Cochrane, Tett, & Vandecreek, 2003). Today, at least 38 states mandate that peace officer applicants be psychologically screened to determine whether they are free of mental or emotional conditions that might interfere with the safe and effective performance of peace officer duties (Corey & Borum, 2013). Moreover, nearly all police agencies serving communities of 25,000 or more in the U.S. require some form of preemployment psychological evaluation (Reaves, 2010), regardless of whether they are compelled to do so by their respective state laws. It has been estimated that 100,000 preemployment assessments of police officer applicants are conducted each year in the U.S., by up to 4,500 participating psychologists (Cutler, 2011; Corey, Cutler, & Moss, 2009). Clearly the preemployment screening of law enforcement applicants has emerged as a core practice area of police psychology (Ben-Porath et al., 2011). And, in contrast to the early years, psychologists practicing in this area now have the benefit of a great number of published resources including empirical research findings, recommendations for best practices, and professional guidelines.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the psychological screening process for law enforcement applicants, with particular attention to recent advances in this distinctive professional practice area. Following some background considerations and identification of key resources, a number of relevant legal principles will be highlighted, including government mandated requirements and landmark cases. The nature of the preemployment psychological screening process for police officer applicants will be described, including consideration of how screenings contribute to but differ from competitive selection. The core features of a basic screening model will be reviewed, followed by consideration of psychological disqualification and appeals. Brief introductions to the major psychological instruments utilized in screenings will be provided, including recently developed and emerging measures. Two considerations that impact the use of psychological tests employed in screenings will be explored: socially desirable responding and range restriction. Recent developments in the identification of psychological qualification standards for peace officers will be considered. Finally, the need for psychological screenings to be culturally sensitive will be discussed, and some major concerns and critiques will be identified. Preemployment psychological screening is applicable to a range of law enforcement occupations including correctional officer and public safety dispatcher. However, the focus of this chapter will be on police officers.

BACKGROUND AND GUIDELINES

The history of preemployment screening of police officer applicants has been explored in depth elsewhere (e.g., Devan, 2003; Kitaeff, 2011; Spielberg & Corey, 2014; Weiss & Inwald, 2010). It is safe to say that while the practice of psychological screenings of law enforcement applicants may have started early in the 20th century, for decades there were few resources available to guide psychologists in this form of high-stakes assessment. In the second half of the 20th century, various federal entities issued reports that called for more attention to psychological factors in the recruitment of police officers. In 1967, the Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice recommended psychological assessment of the emotional stability of all police officer candidates. In 1973, the National

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