



July 2012

Advanced Search

SEARCH

HOME SITE MAP CONTACT US FAQs SUBSCRIBE/RENEW/UPDATE IACP

- [Current Issue](#)
- [Archives Past Issues](#)
- [Web-Only Articles](#)
- [About Police Chief](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Editorial](#)
- [Subscribe / Renew / Update](#)
- [Law Enforcement Jobs](#)
- [Buyers' Guide](#)

[Back to Archives](#) | [Back to August 2011 Contents](#)

[send to a friend](#)

[printer-friendly](#)

Assessing the Psychological Suitability of Candidates for Law Enforcement Positions

By Yossef S. Ben-Porath, Professor of Psychology, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio; James M. Fico, Industrial and Organizational Psychologist, Alpha Courage, Waupaca, Wisconsin; Neil S. Hibler, Director, Special Psychological Services Group, Fairfax, Virginia; Robin Inwald (Retired), Inwald Research Incorporated, Cleverdale, New York; Joelle Kruml, Police Psychologist, Nicoletti-Flater Associates, Lakewood, Colorado; and Michael R. Roberts, President, Law Enforcement Services Incorporate



Assessing the psychological suitability of candidates for law enforcement positions is one of the essential functions of police psychology. Police psychologists are uniquely trained and qualified to perform this service in collaboration with the agencies they serve. The IACP Police Psychological Services Section (PPSS) has developed *Pre-Employment Psychological Evaluation Guidelines*, herein *Guidelines*,¹ that describe a set of principles and recommended procedures for conducting these assessments. The *Guidelines* are not intended to establish a rigid standard of practice for preemployment psychological evaluations. Rather, they describe commonly accepted processes used by experienced law enforcement psychologists. In addition, the PPSS encourages agencies and psychologists to continue to scientifically study how best to predict officer performance and to use the most up-to-date, validated procedures. This article describes and elaborates on the IACPPSS's recommended procedures for conducting preemployment evaluations of law enforcement candidates, with an emphasis on steps the hiring agency's administrators can take to ensure adherence to these practices. The *Guidelines* are written to apply to agencies in the United States, and may, therefore, require modification for use in other countries.

Evaluation Subjects

Preemployment psychological screening can be used as part of the selection process for sworn officers and also for dispatchers, confidential records personnel, crime scene technicians, and evidence and property custodians. All of these employees in a

University of Phoenix
College of Criminal Justice & Security

dedicated
to educating tomorrow's law enforcement leaders.

[Learn More ▶](#)

▶ advertising

For Your Integrated

Public Safety
Software

Solution
Needs

SUNGARD
PUBLIC SECTOR

▶ advertising

law enforcement agency must be able to tolerate the stresses of working in a fast-paced environment, follow rules, use resources responsibly, behave in a trustworthy manner, use good judgment, and refrain from off-duty behavior that would reflect poorly on the department. Thus, although the preemployment psychological evaluation is a critical part of the selection process for weapon-carrying officers, it also is a valuable screening tool for applicants to other job classifications in a law enforcement agency. In these screening assessments, psychological suitability refers to both the absence of job-relevant risk factors and the presence of job-critical personal and interpersonal qualities.

It is rare for even a poorly performing officer to be mentally ill. Instead, applicants who are regarded as poorly suited for work in law enforcement demonstrate a variety of counterproductive behaviors or characteristics including a lack of initiative, unwillingness to follow rules, argumentativeness with their supervisors, untrustworthiness, and overaggressiveness. Poor performers also may abuse alcohol or drugs, both on and off the job. In fact, police managers have observed that the majority of their departments' liability cases and domestic abuse problems involve intoxicated off-duty officers. Job-relevant risk factors considered by psychologists during the preemployment assessment include mental or emotional conditions that would reasonably be expected to interfere with safe and effective job performance.

Preemployment psychological evaluations include medical (for example, substance abuse and disabling mental conditions) and nonmedical (for example, judgment, resilience, and integrity) matters. Because some of the issues considered during the evaluation are medical in nature, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires the preemployment psychological examination to be conducted only after the agency has given the candidate a bona fide conditional offer of employment. However, some screening procedures, including nonmedical assessments of job-related personality characteristics and some background history questionnaires, can be administered before a conditional offer is made, but they cannot include information related to mental or physical health. This issue is described further in the Psychological Interview section of this article.

Working with the Police Psychologist

The *Guidelines* note that examining psychologists must be doctoral-level, licensed psychologists who have expertise in clinical assessment and in the measurement of personality in public safety and security personnel. Because there is considerable research literature on this topic as well as extensive statutory and case law governing preemployment evaluations of public safety employees, examining psychologists need to become and remain knowledgeable in these areas. Additionally, psychological licensing agencies and professional organizations require that psychologists know about and adhere to ethical principles and relevant standards of practice. Even expert law enforcement psychologists will need to become familiar with the working conditions and expectations of the specific agencies they serve. Thus, the hiring agency's administrators should review with the psychologist the specific officer qualities the department considers critical and officer behaviors and characteristics that



Esri
Homeland
Security
Summit

Register Now ▶




ARMORED
SOLUTIONS®



PITTSFIELD MA
800-742-9997
armored-solutions.com

advertising

have caused the department difficulties in the past.

Some important questions an administrator may want to ask a prospective examining psychologist follow:

- Will you provide us with a copy of your license to practice?
- Who was your original mentor from whom you learned your law enforcement specialty?
- With whom do you now consult when you face a difficult professional situation?
- Do you belong to any professional organizations that provide consultation and continuing education?
- Which departments do you currently work with, and who is your contact at these agencies?

- Which departments have you worked with in the past, and who was your contact person at those agencies?
- What practice guidelines do you follow?

The *Guidelines* indicate that prior to the psychological evaluation, the candidate should sign an agreement—supplied by the psychologist—disclosing the nature and objectives of the evaluation, the intended recipients of the report, the fact that the hiring agency is the psychologist's client, the uses of the report and information gathered during the evaluation, and the limits of confidentiality that apply to that information.

Psychological Testing in Preemployment Evaluations

The *Guidelines* indicate that psychologists should use a written test battery, including objective, job-related psychological assessment instruments. Typically, this includes a minimum of two psychological tests validated for public safety personnel screening, which should be objective questionnaires, meaning that they are scored with standard procedures rather than subjectively by the psychologist. The tests should assist the psychologist in identifying concerns about the candidate's emotional stability and highlight suitability factors such as personality traits or a personal history that are indicative of good performance as a police officer. The psychological test results should be reviewed by the psychologist before the interview is conducted so that any issues raised by the test results can be verified and interpreted in the context of other assessment data, such as the background investigation or polygraph reports.

During the last 20 years, there have been many significant improvements to the psychological tests commonly used to screen police applicants. Psychologists now have tests available to them that have a substantial research base with public safety applicants, and several test publishers offer specialized selection reports that include profiles based on police applicant norms as well as other special screening features that enhance selection accuracy.

Although police administrators do not need to become experts in the technical aspects of psychological testing, they should understand enough about the subject to avoid using the services of psychologists who use outdated versions of tests or unlicensed test-scoring programs. To prevent this from occurring,

the department should establish procedures that permit police personnel and human resources representatives to verify that a psychologist is using current tests and materials that are appropriate for employment selection. It is advisable to require an examination of the actual psychological tests and reports a psychologist intends to use during a proposal evaluation process, but a review of test materials can be conducted at any time with an existing psychological provider.

Psychologists sometimes establish cutoff scores in order to make their recommendations based on testing more consistent. Current practice standards require that test score cutoffs be used only when there is research indicating they are useful in predicting job performance as a police officer. Psychologists and police administrators should set realistic expectations for the ability of tests to predict police performance. Psychologists may include new tests in their battery for the purpose of studying the tests' validity in the selection process, but the results of these tests must not be used for decision making until they have demonstrated jobrelated validity.

Psychologists should work with police agency representatives to establish procedures that guarantee the security and confidentiality of all testing materials that may be handled and stored in the department. Failure to do so can jeopardize the utility of these tests in future evaluations. Provisions also should be established to protect the confidentiality of all psychological reports and raw data that are maintained or transmitted, either in hard copy or digital form.

Candidates sometimes produce invalid test results. Invalidity most often occurs because of guarded responding (that is, underreporting), since preemployment testing creates a situation in which candidates understandably strive to create a good impression. Some level of guardedness is expected in candidates and, in fact, the absence of an effort to appear professionally desirable in the evaluation may itself be cause for concern. Other factors that can influence results are English language literacy and cultural experience. Familiarity with cultural and linguistic factors that can affect test scores is a core requirement for competent practice of preemployment evaluation of law enforcement candidates. These are essential considerations, as departments seek officers who will best represent and serve their communities.

The Psychological Interview

The *Guidelines* indicate that the evaluation should include a face-to-face interview. Owing to previously discussed restrictions imposed by the Americans with Disabilities Act, some aspects of the interview must occur only after a candidate has been given a bona fide conditional offer of employment. Consequently, most agencies and psychologists conduct a single postoffer interview.

The *Guidelines* specify that a semistructured, job-related interview should be employed with all candidates. Topics typically covered in the interview include but are not limited to a review of the following areas:

- Educational history
- Employment history

- Compliance with laws and regulations
- Recent illegal substance use
- Interpersonal and familial interactions
- Financial difficulties
- Self-perceived strengths and weaknesses
- Reasons for wanting to work in a public safety position
- Professional goals
- Psychologically relevant medical history (any psychological or psychiatric treatment and medication history, alcohol use and abuse, legal and illegal drug use, trauma history, sexual misconduct, domestic violence, and suicidal ideation or attempts)

A postoffer interview is the only time an applicant can be asked questions pertaining to past and present mental health and past and present medical issues that could have an influence on the applicant's suitability for a law enforcement position. The *Guidelines* recommend that, if applicable, medical records be obtained from treating healthcare professionals for review by the screening psychologist to determine if the treatment issues are relevant to the current assessment before a final determination is made regarding the applicant's suitability.

Two basic styles of clinical interviewing often are employed for the purpose of evaluating a law enforcement applicant. One is a more traditional, in-depth interview, and the other focuses more specifically on behavioral markers. Both styles should allow for sufficient time with an applicant to cover appropriate background information, obtain a clinical assessment of the applicant, and substantiate the assessment results. As mentioned, the psychological interview is semistructured, allowing for flexibility to extend interview time with an applicant given the responses to interview questions. Therefore, the length of an applicant's interview can vary depending on the applicant's personal history and responses to interview questions.

Applicant Behavioral History and the Use of Departmental Background Data

An important part of the preemployment psychological evaluation process involves the integration of an applicant's behavioral history information with the psychological testing and interview data. Screening psychologists may utilize a personal history questionnaire as part of their screening process, but, ideally, they should also review the department's background investigation or polygraph report to provide external verification of the information provided by the applicant. The manner in which an applicant's background information is utilized may vary from department to department. Some agencies request that the evaluating psychologist integrate data from multiple sources (for example, the polygraph, the personal history questionnaire, and so on) not only as part of the psychologist's report, but also as part of the psychological interview. These agencies request that the evaluating psychologist ask the applicants to reconcile inconsistencies in their application materials. Other agencies, however, do not share supplemental background information with the evaluating psychologist.

The *Guidelines* recommend that, when it is available, relevant information from the background investigation and polygraph

examination be shared with the evaluating psychologist. Incorporating such information in the psychological interview allows the psychologist to inquire about inconsistencies in previous responses and solicit additional information from the applicant. This assists the hiring agency in generating another measure of consistency or inconsistency in applicant responses. In all cases, discrepancies between an applicant's responses during the psychological interview and the applicant's responses at other stages of the hiring process should be reviewed thoroughly by the hiring agency before a final hiring decision is made. The *Guidelines* recommend that, when background investigation findings are not provided to the psychologist in advance of the evaluation, the psychologist communicate with designated hiring agency staff to compare and reconcile information obtained from the applicant prior to making a final suitability determination.

Reports

The psychologist's report informs agency administrators about the results of the preemployment evaluation and communicates a recommendation based on those findings. The components of the report explain the sources of information on which the recommendation is based and how the test results, the personal history, and the interview behavior combine to support findings of suitability regarding the duties to be performed.

The format of the report is determined by the psychologist's preferences, the department's requirements, and applicable law. Typically, the content presents what the components of the assessment have revealed, as well as how key elements combine to form and reinforce conclusions; the greater the agreement among assessment components, the greater the confidence in the finding. Limitations in the findings or the recommendation also are addressed. Each component on which the recommendation is based is anchored in the duties the candidate is expected to perform.

The psychologist's recommendations are based on the status of the candidate when evaluated. Significant life events could make a difference in a candidate's suitability over time. Most psychologists consider recommendations to be valid for six months to a year, provided that a candidate's circumstances do not dramatically change during that time period.

Using the Psychological Evaluation

Agencies expect the psychologist to provide well-reasoned and evidence-supported hiring recommendations, and police psychologists strive to deliver them. However, in practice, the results in some cases are clearer than in others. The *Guidelines* indicate that efforts should be made to inform the hiring agency's administrators about the strengths and limitations of preemployment evaluations. In cases where key pieces of information are missing or, as described earlier, a candidate may have been excessively guarded, resulting in ambiguity about his or her suitability for law enforcement, psychologists should communicate this clearly to the referring agency. The decision whether to hire a candidate for whom invalid results were

produced in a preemployment evaluation is ultimately a matter of agency policy rather than a psychological determination. It is the role of the psychologist to inform the agency about the strengths and limitations of the evaluation, and it is up to the agency to decide how to handle cases where there are ambiguous or questionable results.

Psychological evaluations are one component of a multistage selection process that includes academy training, field training, and supervision during the probationary period. Success on the job involves far more than preemployment selection alone. Care should be taken when using the preemployment test results for purposes other than making preemployment decisions. In particular, the hiring agency should not use the preemployment evaluation for promotional evaluations or for positions not expressly considered by the psychologist at the time of the evaluation.

Follow-Up

Assuring the validity of the psychological component of the selection process requires an ongoing collaboration between the hiring agency and the psychologist. Postemployment job outcome data should be provided to the psychologist to permit an evaluation of the accuracy of the psychologist's suitability recommendation. This job outcome information should be collected in accordance with the strict confidentiality provisions protecting individual applicant identities and in accordance with ethical research guidelines and the law. Ideally, the psychologist and hiring agency will set up a procedure for systematically informing the psychologist about the job performance of hired officers, at least through their probationary periods. The psychologist can use this information to calibrate and modify evaluation procedures as needed to maximize the ability to identify ill-suited candidates. Publishing the results of such follow-up efforts in professional, peer-reviewed outlets will allow other agencies and their psychologists to benefit from these collaborative efforts.

A critical component of the follow-up process involves evaluation of whether final suitability ratings and the resulting hiring decisions have an adverse impact on protected classes of candidates. This requires collection of relevant demographic data as part of the screening process and periodic appraisal of the psychologist's pattern of "recommend" and "not recommend" ratings of applicants from protected minorities. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has adopted the four-fifths (or 80 percent) rule as a way to determine the presence or absence of an adverse impact on a particular protected class of applicants. For example, a protected class group, such as Hispanics, should receive a "recommend" rating equal to or higher than 80 percent of Caucasian males—the group with the highest rate, traditionally—in order to avoid charges of adverse impact.²

Finally, the *Guidelines* recommend that psychologists be prepared to defend their reports and candidate ratings if a decision based on a psychological evaluation is challenged. A psychologist who adheres to the *Guidelines* as discussed in this article should have little difficulty defending the results, but it is

recommended that the hiring agency's administrator and the psychologist agree upon how the psychologist would defend evaluation procedures at the time they are put in place, rather than in response to a specific challenge.

Appeals and Second Opinions

Some departments allow candidates to obtain a second opinion as part of an appeal of a negative hiring recommendation. Because the *Guidelines* allow psychologists some flexibility in the tests and procedures they choose to use in a preemployment evaluation, different tests and interviewing procedures may be implemented in a second opinion evaluation—although some police psychologists have advocated for the use of identical tests. In any event, the psychologist who conducts the second opinion evaluation also should be required to adhere to the *Guidelines*, which allows for a meaningful comparison of the results of both evaluations. In cases where the second opinion evaluator differs from the original and makes a positive recommendation, the hiring agency's administrator should review the second opinion evaluator's report very carefully to make sure that factors that led the original evaluator to provide a negative recommendation were properly considered by the second evaluator. It also is important to keep in mind that the second opinion psychologist is usually paid by the job applicant—the client—whereas the initial psychologist's client was the agency. In disputed cases, it is wise to have the agency contract with an independent psychologist to review the conflicting assessments and conduct a tiebreaker evaluation.

Hiring new personnel is an opportunity for law enforcement agencies to ensure that future generations of officers will be able to perform their duties in a safe and effective manner. Hiring also is a critical juncture where costly mistakes can be made. Agencies and psychologists must work together to develop practices that optimize the selection process and lead to the hiring of personnel that best meet the needs of police departments and the public they serve. ■

Notes:

¹The first formal guidelines for mental health professionals conducting preemployment psychological screening programs in law enforcement agencies, written by Robin Inwald, PhD, were published and presented in 1984. In October 1986, the first IACP-PPSS *Pre-Employment Psychological Evaluation Guidelines* were formally adapted from this work. These were the first police psychological evaluation guidelines that were endorsed by a national or international group of police psychologists. In order to keep the *Guidelines* current, the IACP-PPSS appoints a committee to review and update them every five years. In 1992, Vesta Gettys, PhD, chaired a committee that reviewed the first IACP guidelines and changed them to be consistent with then-current legal issues and case law. Stephen Curran, PhD, chaired the next updating committee in 1998 and also cochaired the third updating committee with Susan Saxe-Clifford, PhD, in 2004. Herb Gupton, PhD, and Jay Supnick, PhD, cochaired the most recent committee, updating the *Guidelines* in 2009. Thus, the current version, which is the focus of this article, has been updated four times over the past 27 years.

²29 C.F.R. 1607.4(D).

Please cite as:

Yossef S. Ben-Porath et al., "Assessing the Psychological

Suitability of Candidates for Law Enforcement Positions," *The Police Chief* 78 (August 2011): 64–70.



[Click to view the digital edition.](#)

[Top](#)

From The Police Chief, vol. LXXVIII, no. 8, August 2011.
Copyright held by the International Association of Chiefs of
Police, 515 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314
USA.

[send to a friend](#) 

[printer-friendly](#) 

The official publication of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

The online version of the Police Chief Magazine is possible through a grant from the IACP Foundation. To learn more about the IACP Foundation, click here.

All contents Copyright © 2003 - 2012 International Association of Chiefs of Police. All Rights Reserved.
Copyright and Trademark Notice | Member and Non-Member Supplied Information | Links Policy

515 North Washington St., Alexandria, VA USA 22314 phone: 703.836.6767 or 1.800.THE IACP fax: 703.836.4543
Created by Matrix Group International, Inc.®