

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**The Use of Pre-Employment Psychological Testing  
During the Hiring Process**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

While staffing and retention has long been an issue in law enforcement, a more critical issue is the selection and implementation of suitable applicants. Many individuals apply for and pass the rudimentary process only to find that they are not mentally or emotionally compatible with the demands of the field. The ramifications of recruiting, hiring, and training an officer who proves to be unsuccessful can be as simple as a monetary drain on an already depleted budget, or as catastrophic as a failure to respond or act when placed in a deadly force situation.

A tool, readily available to agencies, is advanced psychological testing. Pre-employment psychological evaluations and testing should be conducted and utilized during the hiring process as well as during training. Evaluations and testing must be conducted that provides results associated with areas indicative of success in law enforcement. Various personality types and characteristics have been identified as proving successful in the field of policing. These areas are qualitative and can be tested for in the same manner as traits that have shown to be a detriment to applicants. These are areas that advanced psychological evaluations and testing must focus on.

While it is vital to gather relevant information from psychological testing as early in the applicant process as possible, it is also advantageous to utilize this information during field training. Research in the identification of suitable traits and characteristics of successful police officers is available for use by departments. To insist that each applicant submit to advanced psychological testing, and utilize the data from those examinations, will allow departments and communities to ensure that the most suitable applicant is chosen for the position of police officer.

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## INTRODUCTION

Many agencies utilize a similar process when hiring a police officer. There is an extensive application that must be filled out listing prior work history, family, residences, and any indiscretions that may have been committed. Following that there are various testing methods that are utilized to ascertain an individual's physical abilities as well as their general knowledge capabilities. Once testing is completed, interviews follow, and these can be one-on-one or in front of an oral board. Those applicants who are successful in moving forward in the hiring process are subject to a background investigation, which attempts to corroborate the information provided in their initial application, as well as uncover any negative information on the applicant. Finally, a rudimentary physical exam and psychological is completed to round out the selection and hiring process. From the hiring agencies standpoint, this process provides a vast amount of information about an applicant's history, physical capabilities, work and life experience, and ability to persevere during what can be an arduous selection process. What it fails to provide is an in-depth analysis of the applicant's mental and emotional suitability for a position in law enforcement.

The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice concluded, in their Task Force Report on The Police, that it was imperative that psychological testing be conducted on potential police applicants (Task Force Report, 1971). Their concern was focused on the emotional stability of a candidate moving into the profession. The complexity of law enforcement and the demands placed on those entering the field have escalated considerably since that time. The expectations placed on police officers, and the responsibilities that they are tasked with, result in a stress

filled and anxiety riddled career choice. Officers must deal with all these issues without resorting to excessive violence, alcohol abuse, or drug use as coping mechanisms (Simmers, Bowers, & Ruiz, 2003). It is imperative that the most suitable applicant be placed in the position of police officer. To effectively reach this goal, law enforcement administrators must be provided with, and utilize, the most accurate information about an applicant's mental and emotional suitability for the position. To facilitate this, and as a means of making informed hiring decisions regarding police applicants, pre-employment psychological evaluations and testing should be utilized during the hiring process. This will provide guidance for the law enforcement community during the hiring process as well as carry over into the training of new hires.

This paper will discuss the current legislative requirements associated with psychological exams for peace officers in the state of Texas and why they are limited and ineffective. Various types of testing will then be examined for their usefulness in the pre-employment process based on the information they provide. The most appropriate timing for pre-employment psychological testing will be identified as well as the ways in which the results can be effectively utilized to determine mentoring and field training methods for police officer candidates.

## **POSITION**

In the state of Texas, a commissioned peace officer must first meet the following requirement: "declared in writing by that professional to be in satisfactory psychological and emotional health...The examination must be conducted pursuant to professionally recognized standards and methods" (TCOLE, 2014). A national survey of municipal police departments found that, although 91% of those who responded did require

psychological testing during their pre-employment process, 68% viewed the results as either pass or fail (Cochrane, Tett, & Vandecreek, 2003). This same survey found that large departments tended to use a variety of procedures during their selection process as well as shy away from the pass or fail mentality with psychological exams (Cochrane et al., 2003). While there is some contradiction between large and small departments and their capabilities and resources in the selection process, the most notable finding was that many departments continue to see the psychological portion of their hiring process as a rudimentary step, and not one that can provide insight into the candidate.

Psychological testing that is conducted during the pre-employment phase is currently viewed by the majority of departments as a means of elimination as opposed to providing insight into the applicant. In a survey of Texas Law Enforcement Agencies in which forty-three agencies responded, 95% reported that they used the psychological results to eliminate candidates (Lee, 2006). Metchik (1999) referred to this as the screening out model and notes that it is a very limiting approach to predicting job performance. Unfortunately, many of the testing areas in which an applicant is eliminated are based on job duties that are rarely asked of an active police officer (Metchik, 1999). Merely conducting a psychological evaluation with a pass or fail result is not an effective method of identifying prospective police officers. It is also not sufficient to subject an applicant to various exams and evaluations without identifying appropriate areas to evaluate. Of those areas, results must then be extrapolated that are most indicative of success in the law enforcement field.

Law enforcement administrations are tasked with identifying which personality types and characteristics will result in a successful police officer. Additionally, they must

also determine which traits will result in libelous behavior on the part of an applicant (Shusman, 1987). Personality, interpersonal, stress, and IQ tests are some of the examples of psychological exams that provide insight into an applicant's capabilities. While there are a wide range of psychological tests that evaluate personality traits, it is important for testing related to police officer applicants to remain focused. A review of data collected from 288 police applicants, all of whom had passed a pre-employment psychological exam, and then submitted to a more in-depth battery of personality tests indicated the following: personality indicators of success included decreased neuroticism and increased extraversion and conscientiousness (Detrick & Chibnall, 2013). Successful candidates noted that they were, "emotionally stable, particularly non-impulsive and steady under stress; people oriented, outgoing, socially dominant, and excitement craving" (Detrick & Chibnall, 2013, p. 375). They further noted that for recruits who submitted to the personality testing, self-evaluated themselves, and received evaluations during their field training, the traits and characteristics of the successful trainee were very similar. This shows a positive correlation between advanced personality testing and job performance.

In the realm of law enforcement, much importance is placed on an individual's leadership ability. This is an additional area that can be evaluated with the use of psychological evaluation in the pre-employment phase. A study of the use of the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation –Behavior Questionnaire (FIRO-B), the Least Preferred Co-Worker Scale (LPC), and the Leadership Opinion Questionnaire (LOQ) indicated a strong relationship between a person's leadership abilities and their interpersonal needs (Kuehl, DiMarco, & Wims, 1975). The tests returned information on

the participants related to how they interacted with others, and how they would most want to be interacted with. This information regarding relationships provided a correlation with their leadership abilities (Kuehl et al., 1975). Research conducted on students at the U.S. Naval Academy utilized the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and confirmed that self-assessments coupled with MBTI findings were accurate indicators of leadership abilities. Those studied provided a self-assessment of their leadership methods and interactions with subordinates. They were then evaluated with the MBTI and the results combined. The subordinates then provided an anonymous evaluation of their leaders in various aspects of their interactions with the group. The use of the MBTI was found to be highly indicative of their leadership behavior (Roush & Atwater, 1992).

The military has long been using psychological testing prior to assignment to ensure their members are placed in areas where they will be most successful. A Sentence Completion Test (SCT) is often utilized prior to assignment to rigorous, stressful positions such as Special Forces, SEALs, or Rangers (Picano, Roland, Williams, & Rollins, 2006). Research was conducted on the correlation between verbal defensiveness in responses to the SCT and the completion of the intensive training for specialized assignments. It was noted that those candidates who exhibited verbal defensiveness during the sentence completion exercise tended to drop out of the process required for special assignments. This study provides an example of a singular test that elicits a multitude of information about an applicant to include motivation and trainability (Picano et al., 2006).



While it is important that pre-employment psychological testing be conducted, it is also relevant that it be done as early in the hiring process as possible. Results provide a definitive action to be taken on each applicant and can prevent the unnecessary waste of resources such as background investigators and oral boards. Unfortunately, many agencies continue to follow the chain of having the applicant complete the initial application, physical testing, written testing, interview, background investigation, polygraph, and a conditional letter of hire (Holzman & Kirschner, 2003). Results from an extensive research project in Australia indicate the need, not only for psychological testing of applicants, but for that testing to take place sooner rather than later. The study utilized the Australian Institute of Forensic Psychology (AIFP) test which is made up of six tests and a separate interview. Once all the results of the test and the interview were complete, they were given to the hiring personnel for consideration in whether an applicant would proceed.

Moving forward in the study, Lough and Ryan (2010) established two groups of applicants: Group 1 was screened using the AIFP, Group 2 received no psychological testing or screening prior to or after employment. A set of criteria was established as a means of calculating poor performance which included such events as calling in sick, citizen complaints, accidents, and internal affairs investigations. Both groups, those having received a positive psychological evaluation prior to their employment, and those not evaluated, were reviewed at their first, second, and third year anniversaries with the department. Negative events were calculated based on the seriousness of the incident and both groups were compared on a year to year basis. At the conclusion of all three years, the group that was evaluated prior to employment consistently had fewer

negative incidents and outperformed the second group in the majority of areas measured (Lough & Ryan, 2010). Lough and Ryan also noted that, "This ability to differentiate between good and poor candidates at the hiring stage is clearly desirable. A healthier and more able workforce provides obvious benefits for both the police force and the general public." (Lough & Ryan, 2010, p. 484-485). While additional research will undoubtedly be conducted on these two cohorts, findings to date have indicated the correlation between pre-employment psychological testing and successful police officer selection.

The responsibility that an agency has to a police officer applicant does not end after the hiring process is complete. While the expectation is that the applicant will successfully complete their licensing academy as well as a field training program, it is incumbent upon the agency to utilize all the means available to assist them in that endeavor. Holzman and Kirschner (2003) discussed a variety of areas in which pre-employment psychological examinations should focus. Forms of psychopathology, which can manifest itself in various personality disorders, is an area that provides a multitude of information about the subject being screened. While this information can lead to an applicant being removed from the selection process, in some instances, it can also provide insight into the personality of the applicant. Another area that should be targeted by the exam is the subjects pre-disposition to having an addictive personality (Holzman & Kirschner, 2003). This can lead to drug or alcohol abuse by an officer when placed in highly stressful situations. Holzman and Kirschner (2003) noted the importance of a police applicant's ability to effectively manage their own behavior. This includes how they would react to various types of situations, different personality

types, and instances requiring anger management. Others areas of importance in the psychological exam process lie in its ability to note communication skills, empathy, and prior life experiences and how they can effect a police officer. Individual interviews with a psychologist are useful in providing additional information related to the applicant's lifestyle, relationships, and support system (Holzman & Kirschner, 2003). They further noted that those areas of importance can allow a department an insight into their choice police officer applicant that is invaluable. Each applicant is required to complete a version of a field training program and works very closely with their field training officer and, in some cases, an assigned mentor. Information related to a newly hired officer regarding stress management, self-management, teamwork, personality type, life experience, and existing support system give that training officer or mentor the base to begin training. Issues that are encountered during training can be addressed more readily with the appropriate background of information provided.

Law enforcement administrations are currently required to complete a psychological examination on an applicant prior to completion of the hiring process. This process is used by many departments merely to eliminate candidates from a large pool of applicants. While this is the most rudimentary and minimal use of an exam, the potential exists to utilize in a far more constructive manner. Information related to various aptitudes, personality types, leadership abilities, motivation, trainability, and pre-dispositions to specific behaviors give a hiring committee a wealth of knowledge about a candidate. Testing in the above listed areas, coupled with a psychological interview, can be viewed as a necessity for a department attempting to choose its next police officer. Ideally, the results would be provided to the hiring committee, and then be

allowed to follow the applicant as a new hire and be given to the training officer. With this system in place, the candidate's ability to successfully complete a training program and adjust to the position would be improved substantially.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Law enforcement agencies are dependent upon the public for their budgetary requirements and are therefore accountable for its uses. To add advanced psychological testing to the hiring process will certainly have an impact on the cost associated with each applicant. More than likely, agencies impacted the most would be the smaller municipal departments whose budgets are limited. In a hypothetical cost analysis of psychological testing and assessments, the following resources were noted as requiring either a set cost or an hourly fee: psychologist, materials, equipment, space, and overhead (Yates & Taub, 2003). This additional cost per applicant would be borne by the department. In a national survey of police departments of varying size, Cochrane, Tett, and Vandecreek (2003) found that, "There were few differences found in selection and psychological assessment practices among departments of different size, population served, and degree of hiring selectivity...Larger agencies tend to have more resources and funds for several activities including selection of officers" (Cochrane et al., 2003, p. 530). This indicates that the resources are being allocated for the hiring process, and in many instances the testing is available to the department. It is apparent that larger agencies are already conducting pre-employment psychological evaluations on their applicant pool, and the study noted above (Cochrane et al, 2003) indicated little difference in those testing procedures done by smaller departments. Cost does not appear to be the limiting factor. If anything, that which is limited is the

advanced testing and the manner in which the information is used once it has been obtained. The additional cost consideration can be compared to the lost investment if a police officer fails to be successful in his or her position. In 2003, the estimated cost to train a police officer by the Los Angeles Police Department was \$100,000 (Cochrane et al, p. 512). It is far more cost effective to invest in advanced pre-employment psychological testing than to forfeit the time and money laid out for a new hire.

Current licensing requirements for peace officers in the state of Texas, in reference to psychological examinations, are limited to written documentation that the applicant is psychologically healthy ([www.TCOLE.Texas.Gov](http://www.TCOLE.Texas.Gov)). State legislation has consistently strived to create mandatory licensing requirements that set a professional and consistent standard for the position of peace officer. Many times, recommendations are set at a federal level and then adopted by states. While these mandatory requirements are the minimum that must be met by an agency, there is no limit to additional measures that can be taken. According to the Business Dictionary, a best practice is, "A method or technique that has consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means, and that is used as a benchmark" ([www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com)). Establishing in-depth pre-employment psychological testing as a best practice in the field of law enforcement could be accomplished without it being legislatively mandated. To do so would allow agencies the opportunity to explore various testing tools and determine how best to utilize the results.

The right to privacy, as it relates to psychological exams, can be complicated in the private sector. It is equally as complicated when used in personnel selection. This is not a new issue, and was addressed by a 1965 congressional inquiry into

psychological examinations conducted on employees. Concerns about personality test results being an invasion of privacy were validated by the inquiry (Shah, 1970). The recommendation to those in the psychiatric community and to the American Psychological Association was to improve training in the area of psychology and law. It was further suggested that the American Psychological Association review ethical standards related to privacy. While the privacy rights of the applicant are not to be taken lightly, it is imperative that a risk factor be established, tested for, and used to identify those applicants who will potentially become a liability to a department. The applicant's right to privacy does not override legal precedents which have consistently ruled against agencies for either failing to act on psychological results or failing to establish a psychological testing program (Rostow & Davis, 2002). This indicates that a greater degree of importance is being placed on the safety of the community than on the right to privacy of an applicant.

It is arguably a difficult determination as to what the psychological make-up of a successful police officer consists of. Likewise, it is controversial to suggest that the law enforcement community submit their applicants to psychological testing to ascertain if they have those traits. Much of the initial testing conducted for police agencies was focused on cognitive abilities. Later testing evolved to a focus on personality characteristics. As technology has increased, the trend to measure intelligence has been revived and leads many tests that are available for potential police officer candidates (Ho, 2001). Notably, "there appears to be little agreement on what constitutes an ideal officer...use of these ideal standards to select officers has not been a proven procedure" (Rostow & Davis, 2002, p.102). Although the psychological make-

up of the ideal police officer candidate has not been identified, it is apparent that certain traits and characteristics are indicative of a successful officer. Areas of notable concern center around the applicant's ability to make sound decisions, communicate effectively, and work within the confines of a team as well as independently (Lee, 2006).

Psychological testing designed to measure honesty, motivation, problem solving, loyalty, patience, and compassion are just a few that can be utilized in identifying the probability for success with an applicant.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Much of the liability associated with law enforcement can be traced to the initial steps taken during the hiring process. Agencies are scrutinized in hindsight for placing an applicant in such a high stress and potentially volatile environment when they are unsuccessful in the position. To help the administrations make informed choices in their hiring process, psychological testing should take place prior to moving an applicant forward. Current mandates exist for a psychological exam that has no specific guidelines and can be limited to a simple pass or fail conclusion. Research has shown, not only the preferred characteristics of a police officer, but also the validity associated with testing for those traits. To utilize the test results most effectively is to have them early in the hiring process. They should accompany an applicant as they progress and provide guidance for a selection committee, field training officer, and mentors. These individuals are responsible for transitioning an applicant from candidate to officer and should be afforded all the available tools to complete that transition as effectively as possible.

Budgetary constraints plague all departments and measures that are introduced that will add to that issue are usually not popular. An additional cost per applicant to a department, specifically a small department, can have a huge impact on their current allotment of funds. Research has shown; however, that the initial long term investment in an applicant will provide dividends in the long run. The potential to eliminate problematic or troublesome employees can be an overwhelming benefit from a liability perspective. To not take advantage of the resources available through pre-employment psychological exams can be seen as a failure on the part of an administration. The responsibility of a department in the hiring process to not only choose the most qualified applicant, but also prepare them adequately for the position, can be interpreted to indicate liability on the department when testing is not utilized.

Keeping in mind that departments and agencies are not currently mandated to provide anything beyond a cursory psychological evaluation for licensing, there is nothing preventing them from going the extra mile. Legislation can be a result from proven best practices and it is incumbent upon the law enforcement community to work towards and utilize those best practices. While legislative mandates concern law enforcement administrations, the issue of confidentiality is a concern of all involved to include administrators, applicants, and psychologists. Administrations can rely heavily on precedence set in court cases that have established the use of psychological exams in the hiring process as an acceptable practice.

The answer to the question, "What makes a good cop?" could be debated endlessly. No one can definitively say what the finite requirements are, nor can candidates be eliminated solely based on the absence or presence of various



characteristics or traits. What has been concluded is that law enforcement officers are leaders, and, as such, must have certain characteristics and traits to be successful in the policing environment. Psychological testing can be done to determine if an individual has those known traits and characteristics. It is in the best interest of the law enforcement community, as well as the people that they serve, to place the most qualified applicant into the position of police officer. To identify that individual, the use of advanced pre-employment psychological testing is vital. Additional testing can easily be requested and completed as a battery during the mandatory psychological examination. Results can be utilized by the hiring committee as well as department mentors and field training officers to place an applicant in an environment conducive to their success and one that produces a favorable outcome for all involved.

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