Recruiting and Selecting Police Officers

The field of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology has developed significant knowledge about police officer characteristics that contribute to officer effectiveness, especially community-oriented policing. Critically important elements of community-oriented police work include:

- **Integrity** – enforcing the law with fairness to all; acting with principle and courage.
- **Community Relations** – establishing trusting relationships with citizens; being respectful of people with backgrounds and values different from one’s own; dealing with others in an interpersonally effective manner.
- **Situational, Discretionary Judgment & Problem Solving** – accurately assessing the situation and determining appropriate responses in all circumstances, including emergency, stressful, and dangerous situations; using authority and force appropriately.
- **Teamwork** – cooperating and working jointly with other officers, departments, divisions, agencies, or groups.
- **Safety** – being mindful of own, partner, and citizen safety.
- **Patrolling, Observing, & Enforcing the Law** – being alert to unusual circumstances, providing reasonable and proper enforcement of vehicular and traffic laws.

Studies that summarize the relationship between an officer’s characteristics and his or her job performance indicate the following are important: Conscientiousness, self-control, interpersonal effectiveness with people of all backgrounds and values, service orientation, quick and effective decision-making under pressure, situational/practical judgment, memory, mental ability, courage, and resiliency. Police officers who possess these characteristics are likely to perform well in the varied and demanding roles of a police officer. Police departments that incorporate measures of these characteristics into their personnel selection and promotion systems have more effective officers who work to protect and serve the community and are less likely to have adverse impact against minorities.

**Police Officer Recruitment and Diversifying the Force**

It is important for police agencies to attract job applicants with the characteristics of effective police officers. Some key findings of work on recruitment of police officers are:

- The majority of departments report some difficulty attracting qualified applicants.
- Recruitment of police officers is typically accomplished through career fairs, internet and newspaper ads, community organizations, college outreach, and walk-ins, with the majority of agencies conducting targeted recruiting for racial/ethnic minorities, women, college graduates, military veterans, and candidates with prior police experience.
- Although police agencies devote considerable time and energy to recruitment, there are fewer resources devoted to employer branding, recruitment website development, and establishing, maintaining, and monitoring a social presence than in many private sector organizations.
- The race and sex of applicants and new hires for entry-level jobs in large police departments are: White male (50% of applicants, 60% of new hires), Other male (30% of applicants, 25% of new hires), White female (10% or applicants and 10% of new hires), and Other female (10% of applicants and 5% of new hires). In smaller cities/smaller departments, there tends to better representation of women but very serious underrepresentation of minorities.
Research on targeted recruitment of minorities and women suggests value in a) advertising and recruitment materials that reflect a diverse workforce, b) application materials and information equally accessible to all, c) employee referral programs that reflect the diversity of the community, d) withdrawal and turn-down rates examined in terms of diversity, and e) systematic information on applicant perceptions of the diversity climate and reputation of the organization. Although some police agencies engage in these activities, they are seldom monitored on an ongoing basis. Increasing the number of diverse candidates in a pool can be relatively unimportant if the number of candidates in the pool with the desired attributes is not also increasing.

**Reducing Adverse Impact in Selection**

In addition to the important role of recruitment in diversifying a police force, considerable evidence exists on how to best utilize assessments that minimize adverse impact for different groups. Key conclusions are:

- Choice of characteristics to measure affects adverse impact against minorities. It is standard for police departments to screen applicants using psychological, medical/vision, and physical ability tests, and to disqualify applicants on the basis of past convictions and driving violations. It is likely that ethnic minority applicants are being screened out at a higher rate due in part to the use of pre-employment tests and past criminal record as a basis for deselecting applicants, whereas female applicants are likely to be screened out at a higher rate if physical ability tests are used.
- Another factor that affects adverse impact against minorities is method of measurement. Interviews, background information, situational judgment, assessment centers, and job/work samples (e.g. simulations exercises such as in-baskets and role-playing as well as portfolio assessments) are all known to measure cognitive abilities with less adverse impact than written, multiple-choice cognitive ability tests. These methods of measurement are also highly useful for measuring characteristics other than cognitive ability that are as important to effective police work.
- Administration mode and response format can also increase or decrease adverse impact against minorities. For example, video-administered situational judgment tests have less adverse impact compared to written situational judgment tests.
- Methods of weighting, sequencing of tools, and other aspects of combining assessment information also affect adverse impact outcomes.
- Demographic similarity between interviewers and candidates is not as important as ensuring a) a structured interview process, b) careful selection and training of interviewers, and c) interviewer accountability for hiring effectiveness.
- Applicant retesting and exemption policies also affect adverse impact outcomes.

**Future Directions in Methods of Selection**

Police officer selection technology lags behind other industries. Currently, little use is made of:

- Computerized assessments.
- Innovative technologies that enhance security of unproctored web-based testing.
- Technological advances that enable high fidelity simulations.
- Methodological advances that lessen likely faking on self-report testing methods.
- Video interviewing methods.