

CHAPTER 2

Police Psychology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Outline the major steps in developing a valid police selection procedure.
- Describe the various instruments that are used to select police officers.
- Define what is meant by the term police discretion.
- List some key decisions in policing that require the use of discretion.
- Outline some of the major sources and consequences of stress in policing.
- Describe various strategies for dealing with police stress.

OUTLINE

Police Selection

Police selection is the process by which police agencies screen out applicants with undesirable qualities or select in those with desirable qualities. Typical qualities assessed include physical fitness, cognitive abilities, personality, and job related abilities.

Police selection techniques have been employed since the early 1900s. In 1917 the Stanford-Binet intelligence test was used and applicants who scored under 80 were screened out. In the 1940s, personality tests were beginning to be used to predict police officer performance and by the 1950s psychological and psychiatric screening procedures were standard in many agencies.

In the 1960s and 1970s, major changes to the police selection process took place in the United States as a result of two major events – the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice and the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals in the United States. Currently, police forces across the United States use formal procedures for selecting officers. Every force conducts background checks and requires medical exams and most forces require cognitive and personality tests. In general, the same selection procedures are used by police agencies across the United States, although slight differences do exist (e.g., whether or not a polygraph is required).

The Police Selection Process

There are two general stages in the police selection process: (1) job analysis and (2) construction and validation.

Job analysis is usually conducted by an organizational psychologist, and involves a procedure that defines the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that make a good police officer. However, research suggests that there may not be a single set of KSAs that are desirable. For example, desirable KSAs may vary across positions in a police force (Ainsworth, 1993). In spite of these issues, research indicates agreement on some KSAs. These include honesty, reliability, sensitivity, communication skills, motivation, problem solving skills, and being a team player (Sanders, 2003).

Construction and validation involves developing an instrument to measure the presence of relevant KSAs in applicants (construction) and ensuring the instrument developed is related to future police officer performance (validation). Validation measures commonly focus on predictive validity, which concerns the extent to which the selection instrument accurately predicts job performance. Difficulty in validation arises when deciding what performance measure to use. Measures often used include punctuality, complaints, or commendations. However, there is currently no research that identifies which measures are the best indicators of job performance.

The Validity of Police Selection Instruments

The selection interview is one of the most commonly used police selection instruments. Generally, these interviews are semi-structured in an attempt to ensure objectivity in the selection process (Gowan & Gatewood, 1995). The goal of the interview is to determine if the applicant has the desired KSAs, as identified in a job analysis. Research concerning the predictive validity of selection interviews is mixed (e.g., McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994).

Psychological tests are also often used for police selection purposes, and include cognitive ability tests and personality tests.

Cognitive ability tests are designed to measure constructs such as memory, logic, observation, and comprehension. These types of tests are used frequently across the United States, such as the cognitive abilities exam used by the Cincinnati Police Department. Research indicates these tests are better at predicting police training performance rather than performance while on the job (Hirsh, Northrop, & Schmidt, 1986). Personality factors may also play a role in on the job performance, which may be why it is difficult to predict future performance by only taking into account one's cognitive abilities.

Personality tests measure aspects of personality. Although not originally designed for police selection purposes, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) is

the most common personality test used in the selection process (Cochrane, Tett, & Vandecreek, 2003). This test identifies psychopathologies, such as schizophrenia and depression. The MMPI is moderately able to predict police officer performance (Sanders, 2003). The Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI) was developed for law enforcement to identify applicants best suited for police work. It measures personality attributes and behavior patterns such as stress reactions and interpersonal difficulties. Research indicates that the IPI has slightly better predictive accuracy than the MMPI (Scogin, Schumacher, Gardner, & Chaplin, 1995).

Assessment Centers

Assessment centers are facilities where the behavior of police applicants can be observed in different ways by multiple observers. The primary selection instrument used in these centers is the situational test, which attempts to test for the presence of appropriate KSAs, as identified in the job analysis. Situational tests involve simulating real world tasks often faced by police officers, and are followed by a performance evaluation given by trained observers. Research suggests these tests moderately predict both training and on the job performance (Pynes & Bernardin, 1992).

Police Discretion

Police discretion refers to a need for police officers to distinguish between situations where adherence to the law is required and situations where a certain degree of flexibility is warranted.

Police discretion is needed for a number of reasons. For example, if all laws were unconditionally enforced, the various branches of the criminal justice system would be overwhelmed.

There are a number of situations where police discretion is undoubtedly required, including when police officers have to deal with: youth, mentally disordered offenders, domestic dispute situations, and use of force situations.

Use of discretion when dealing with young offenders is actively encouraged in the United States. Common police responses to youth crime include formal arrests, police cautions, community referrals, and family conferences. Since the 1960s, research has demonstrated that youth crime is often dealt with by the police in an informal manner.

Police officers also frequently encounter offenders with mental illnesses. Formal policies present a range of response options for police officers in such encounters. For example, they can resolve the situation informally, escort the offender to a psychiatric facility, or make an arrest (Teplin, 2000).

Domestic Violence

Historically, partner violence was often ignored by police. As a result, policies have been put in place to encourage arrests. However, discretion is still used by the police in responding to these situations (Melton, 1999).

Although use-of-force situations are relatively rare, police officers must exercise a great deal of discretion upon encountering such a situation. The police may use force under reasonable grounds as deemed necessary to suppress a situation.

Many agencies have established guidelines in an attempt to ensure discretion is applied appropriately. The use-of-force continuum is a model that is supposed to help guide a police officer's decision making in the use-of-force situations by providing the officer with some guidance as to what level of force is appropriate given the suspect's behavior and other environmental conditions.

Police Stress

Policing is an occupation that involves high levels of stress for both officers and their families. There are different categories of police stressors including: occupational, organizational, criminal justice, and public stressors. Research suggests that some of the most highly ranked stressors are organizational stressors, such as the feeling that departmental rules are applied selectively (Taylor & Bennell, 2006).

Being exposed to stress results in physical, psychological, personal, and job-related consequences. For example, with regards to physical consequences, police officers are at an increased risk to develop cardiovascular disease (Franke, Collins, & Hinz, 1998). Psychological and personal consequences include depression, anxiety, marital difficulties, and suicide (Brown & Campbell, 1994). Finally, job-related consequences include poor morale, absenteeism, and early retirement (Brown & Campbell, 1994).

Police agencies have recognized the need to prevent and manage negative stress reactions among officers. Some stress management programs attempt to change maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., substance abuse) by teaching officers skills to more effectively deal with stressful events. Training in these adaptive coping skills has been shown to have a positive influence on both the health of police officers as well as the way in which they manage future stressful situations, which ultimately improves job performance (McCraty, Tomasino, Atkinson, & Sundram, 1999).

SUGGESTED LECTURE ACTIVITIES

Police Selection

Show students a police recruitment video off the internet (e.g., Dallas Police Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff). Ask students to generate a list of the policing jobs they observe in the video (e.g., patrol, administrator, detective, etc.) and the sorts of KSAs associated with those jobs. Have the students discuss the implications of their observations for a job analysis (e.g., the fact that different policing jobs are characterized by different KSAs).

Have students discuss what performance measure (e.g. commendations, citizen complaints, punctuality, etc.) should be used in validating selection instruments and why. Have them make a list of possible advantages and disadvantages of using each performance measure.

Police Discretion

Have students debate the necessity of police discretion, including the fact that the criminal justice system has limited resources to accommodate the many potential offenders that may exist if the law is fully enforced.

Provide students with the following scenario: A well-dressed middle aged woman is walking down the street intoxicated. As a police officer, what action do you take? What factors went into your decision? Do you think they are similar to factors police officers consider when exercising their discretion? Ask if their decisions would have been different if they witnessed an older man who was shabbily dressed walking down the street?

Police Stress

Have students discuss why organizational stressors may be rated as highly stressful.

Have students generate departmental policies that would reduce the stress experienced by police officers or promote adaptive coping behaviors.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Blau, T. H. (1994). *Psychological services for law enforcement*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

Brown, J. M., & Campbell, E. A. (1994). *Stress and policing: Sources and strategies*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

Miller, L. (2006). *Practical police psychology: Stress management and crisis intervention for law enforcement*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Walma, M. W., & West, L. (2002). *Police powers and procedures*. Toronto, ON: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited.

KEY TERMS

Assessment Center

Cognitive Ability Tests

Inwald Personality Inventory

Job Analysis

Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory

Occupational Stressors

Organizational Stressors

Police Discretion

Police Selection Procedures

Psychological debriefing

Selection Interview

Situational Test

Use-of-force continuum