

PREDICTING FITNESS FOR HIRE/DUTY FOR POLICE OFFICERS

Predicting Fitness for Hire/Duty Examinations (FFHDE's) for Police Officers is a complex and important process. A Fitness for Hire Evaluation is considered a pre-employment screening to recommend someone for hire as a Police Officer. A Fitness for Duty Examination is for an incumbent Officer who has been sent by his department to ensure he is psychologically fit for duty.

There are multiple issues with regard to FFHDE's, some of the main issues will be addressed in this document: These include: 1. Predictive Validity, 2. Normative Samples, Defensiveness, and Response Styles, 3. The California Post Dimensions, 4. "Typical Cop Problems", and 5. Typical Batteries

Predictive Validity

Predictive validity refers to how accurate psychologists are in predicting what they are trying to predict. It looks at the question, "What percentage of the time is a psychologist correct in their opinion about fitness?" It is important to use measures shown in research to be linked to the outcome variable, fitness. Many measures have been used in evaluations, but not all have been proven in research studies to be accurate in predicting psychological fitness for duty. It should not be assumed, just because a measure is useful in a clinical population, that it is relevant to the issues involved in police screening. But, there is a paucity of research on the predictive validity of the "everyday" clinical tools used by psychologists. As a result, measures, not shown in research to be predictive of fitness are often used because they are predictive of clinical syndromes and addictions. Two ways to improve the predictive validity of FFHDE's is to use measures proven in research to be predictive of fitness and to conduct future research on the predictive validity of "everyday" clinical tools.

Normative Samples, Defensiveness, and Response Styles

A normative sample is a sample of individuals who have previously taken a given test. Typical sample numbers are in the thousands. An examinee's score during a FFHDE is compared to that normative sample to see how their scores compare. Scores too high or too low are considered "not-normative" or "outliers" because they lie outside of the typical responses in that group and are rarer for that sample. The type of normative samples used in FFHDE's is important because that has an effect on whether or not the individual is being compared to individuals similar to him/herself.

A sample of applicants who were subsequently hired, or a sample of incumbent Police Officers is called a “public safety sample” and is preferable to a clinical or community sample for multiple reasons. One is that it’s part of the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Ethical Guidelines that appropriate normative samples be used when conducting psychological assessments. Second, because the individual is being assessed with regard to employment and is not an individual in the community seeking psychological assessment (the level of defensiveness when taking the test differs significantly). Most individuals assessed for FFHDE’s are hoping to be found fit and free from mental illness and naturally this may lead to defensiveness - a tendency to portray oneself in a favorable light - and/or an unwillingness to admit to minor shortcomings. This elevates many of the validity scales in the measures that check for response styles.

A response style is a style of responding that often renders the results invalid. A response style is an individual’s tendency to deliberately try to fake good or bad or to respond randomly or inconsistently to items.

Using public safety samples can minimize the likelihood that measures will be invalidated because of defensiveness or a tendency to fake good. This is because the entire normative sample was being assessed for employment reasons and not a clinical reason or to participate in a study. Therefore, in FFHDE’s, the tendency to fake good would likely be the “norm” because the officers will want to be seen as fit. The use of a public safety sample serves to normalize a tendency to portray oneself in a positive light. Thus, an elevated validity scale in a public safety sample would have to be very highly elevated to be significant. Using a public safety sample also helps to detect pathology that would have been missed if the individual was portraying themselves in a positive light; however, not to the extent that the measure was invalidated. In those cases, the scales assessing for pathology would be reduced and there would be a greater likelihood the psychologist would not see the problems when looking at the data. This is because the scale that assesses for various dimensions would be depressed, or subthreshold and not flagged as a problem. Therefore, when possible it is better to use measures that offer a public safety normative sample.

California POST Dimensions

It is important to define “fitness” or what one is trying to predict as a construct or abstract idea. The California Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) dimensions provide a well-researched and defined taxonomy. There are ten dimensions for psychological screening as follows:

1. Social Competence; involves social awareness, empathy, respectful communication, and concern in one’s daily interactions.
2. Adaptability-Flexibility; involves the ability to adjust to unexpected or sudden tasks, and the continuation of duties without supervision.
3. Impulse Control-Attention to Safety; involves the avoidance of unnecessarily risky and/or impulsive behavior, attention and awareness of hazards, and ability to suppress impetuosity.
4. Teamwork; includes effectiveness in working with others, providing assistance, and maintaining cooperative working relationships.
5. Conscientiousness-Dependability; involves reliable and diligent work patterns, carrying out assigned tasks, good organizational skills, and perseverance.
6. Integrity-Ethics; involves maintaining high standards of personal conduct, abiding by laws and procedures, and not bending rules or abusing the system for a personal gain.
7. Avoiding Substance Abuse & Other Risk-Taking Behavior; involves avoiding participation in risky behavior which can be self-damaging or inappropriate (e.g. sale of drugs, domestic violence, alcohol or drug abuse)
8. Emotional Regulation & Stress Tolerance; involves the ability to stay in control and maintain composure in stressful situations, acceptance of mistakes, and maintaining an even temperament on and off duty.
9. Assertiveness-Persuasiveness; involves taking control appropriately in all situations, the ability to confront suspects, and persuading others to adopt a desired course of action.
10. Decision-Making & Judgment; involves the ability to use practical judgment and efficient problem solving skills, and the application of deductive and inductive reasoning when necessary.

The California POST Commission conducted a statewide analysis of the demands and requirements of the job through subject matter experts (Patrol Supervisors and Field Training Officers) from the entire state of California rating the importance of various competencies to successful Officer performance. After three empirical studies, the above dimensions were found to consistently be linked to successful performance in Police Officers.

FFDE's and Typical Problems with Police Officers

While the POST dimensions are used to define the “ideal” cop, they are dynamic and not static variables, meaning that they do not remain fixed but instead can change over time. Once an Officer is found fit for hire, s/he may encounter problems or experience trauma, or other circumstances may arise that may render that Officer unfit. Typically, Police Departments will identify a problem and then send the Officer for a Fitness for Duty Evaluation in which the Officer is evaluated.

Reasons for Referral of an Officer for examination typically fall into four main categories:

1. Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
2. Substance Abuse Problems
3. Domestic Violence/Anger Management Problems
4. Other.

Due to the circumstances of the job and the role of being a first responder, Police Officers often experience work-related trauma. Many officers also have substance use disorders, either as coping mechanism for PTSD or for other reasons. It is more typical for alcohol use to be problematic than street drugs as Officers are randomly drug tested. However, Officers who have had work-related injuries may become addicted to prescribed opiates or pain killers.

Difficulties in managing anger and relationships is common in Police Officers. Long hours, night shifts, a need to maintain control and order at work, and pent up anger can result in domestic violence calls and anger management issues. Finally, there are a number of “Other” situations which fall into a mixed category. These may be related to off or on duty misconduct, head traumas, dementias, concussions, brain diseases, grief, or other illness that can affect mental state like a thyroid condition.

Typical Batteries

Batteries for pre-employment screening typically involve a measure of normal personality traits such as the Big Five; 1. Conscientiousness, 2. Emotional Stability, 3. Agreeableness, 4. Extraversion, and 5. Openness.

The California Personality Inventory (CPI) looks at the Big Five traits, as well as others. The factor scales of the CPI have been researched and shown to be valid predictors of the California POST dimensions. Public safety norms are also available for the test. The public safety report also offers favorable and unfavorable job indicators related to fitness, as well as information about job suitability.

Also typically administered in FFHDE's is a screen for psychopathology and substance abuse. The Personality Assessment Inventory-Public Safety Selection Report (PAI-PS) and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-Restructured Form-Police Candidate Interpretive Report (MMPI-RF-PCIR) are also designed to detect pathology and substance use disorders. Both measures provide public safety norms and information regarding job suitability.

In FFDHE's, a measure of cognitive functioning is also typically given to ensure adequate cognitive functioning. The choice of cognitive measures depends upon the purpose of the testing. For instance, in a pre-employment examination in which multiple applicants might need to be assessed cognitively, a group administered measure that provides a quick cognitive screening is typically administered. However, if the individual is already an officer and suffers from a head trauma or a possible dementia, full testing with a comprehensive IQ test, or the use of neuropsychological measures, might be indicated in order to answer the question of fitness.

Various other measures are often used to assess background history, substance abuse, violence risk, suicide risk, current stressors, coping abilities, and state or trait anger. Most of these measures have no public safety norms and have not been proven to have predictive validity in FFHDE's. However, many of the clinical measures do have predictive validity with regard to the individual problems or mental health disorders assessed. One measure, the State Trait Anger Inventory (STAXI) offers a Police and Public Safety Selection Report.

Nicole J. Rafanello, Ph.D.

NJ License #: 4972

DC License #: PSY100040

Further Readings:

American Psychological Association (2010). *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*. Retrieved June 2, 2016, from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/>

California Post Dimensions Handbook (2016). Retrieved May, 2016, from <https://www.post.ca.gov/background-investigation-manual-guidelines-for-the-investigator.aspx>

Donner, C. M., Fridell, L. A., & Jennings, W. G. (2016). The Relationship Between Self-Control and Police Misconduct: A Multi-Agency Study of First-Line Police Supervisors. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* (pp. 841-860). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

International Association of Chiefs of Police (2013). *Officer-Involved Shooting Guidelines*. Retrieved May, 2016, from <http://www.iacp.org/ELibrary>

Kitaeff, J. (2011). *Handbook of Police Psychology*. New York, NY: Routledge

Marchand, A., Nadeau, C., Beaulieu-Prévost, D., Boyer, R., & Martin, M. (2015). Predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder among police officers: A prospective study. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, And Policy*

Websites

American Psychological Association
<http://www.apa.org>

California POST Dimensions
<https://www.post.ca.gov/peace-officer-psychological-screening-manual.aspx>

International Association for Correctional and Forensic Psychology
<http://www.aa4cfp.org/>

International Association of Chiefs of Police
<http://www.iacp.org/>

Society for Police and Criminal Psychology
<http://www.policepsychology.org/>