



Data indicates that a few specific variables correlate with officer behavior.

# Police Recruitment and Selection:

## What Does the Evidence Say?

*A CIRMA Law Enforcement Advisory*

*Committee White Paper - By Jeremiah Johnson, Ph.D.*



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## **Introduction**

There is a growing consensus that recruitment and selection have become increasingly difficult for law enforcement organizations. There is no source of empirical data to test that claim, yet a number of police chiefs have publically expressed this belief.<sup>[1]</sup> Veteran officers and executives may recall the days when hundreds, if not thousands, of applicants vied for a handful of open positions. The employment landscape today is strikingly different. The reasons for this shift are not readily apparent and cannot be attributed to one factor. Police officer salaries remain well above the average state income while elevated rates of unemployment persist in many states.<sup>[2]</sup> Public sector benefits have arguably waned over time, yet compensation alone is not a satisfactory explanation for the decline.

There are likely two key factors at play. First, many police departments have increased their hiring standards. What was formerly a low-skill job has become highly complex. This fact is reflected by POST training curriculums which are measurably extended every few years. Police officers are expected to function as general practitioners amidst legal and social environments that are constantly in flux. Hiring standards, formally codified or otherwise, have necessarily changed to reflect this reality.

The second reason for the decline is more abstract, but of equal importance. There is a sense that the policing vocation has become less appealing to various demographic groups in the workforce. It is easy to forget that the employer is not the only entity engaged in the selection process; applicants self-select what jobs to apply for. A recent Harvard University study found that 49% of Millennials age 18-29 do not perceive the criminal justice system to be fair.<sup>[3]</sup> Likewise, racial and ethnic minorities along with female workers may not view law enforcement as a potential career field. As an occupation, American policing is historically working class, white, and overwhelmingly male. Significant strides have been made in diversifying police departments. Racial and ethnic minority representation among local police departments nearly doubled from 1987 to 2013.<sup>[4]</sup> The number of female officers and first-line supervisors also increased modestly over the same time period.<sup>[4]</sup> Still, the policing field itself may be “typecast” along gender, class, and racial lines, effectively discouraging applicants from different backgrounds. This is especially true in the post-Ferguson era where trust in the police consistently measures low among minorities.<sup>[5]</sup> There is much work to be done in this area; diversifying the police force to reflect the community is a step forward, but is by no means a panacea.<sup>[6]</sup>

Solving these problems is far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the aim is to provide police administrators with a roadmap for the selection process. Informed by robust data, this paper will help organizations “screen in” high-performing candidates, while simultaneously “screening out” would-be applicants who are prone to civil liability and misconduct. Policing research has identified specific attributes that are correlated with employee performance, good and bad. Certain variables, like education, are associated with high performance and low rates of misconduct. But there is always an exception to the rule: not every college-educated candidate will live up to this standard and not every candidate who lacks a college degree will engage in misconduct. It is a matter of statistical probability. By properly screening the applicant pool, law enforcement organizations increase their odds of hiring candidates with the best potential.

## **The Evidence**

This whitepaper draws heavily from two scientific studies on police performance and misconduct. Making policy decisions based on just two studies might seem questionable, yet this research is both reliable and largely generalizable to police departments of

all sizes. The first study is a meta-analysis (a statistical approach that looks across datasets drawn from multiple studies) by Michael Aamodt on the topic of police performance.<sup>[7]</sup> The second is an extensive study by Robert Kane and Michael White covering every instance of career-ending misconduct in the NYPD between 1975 and 1996.<sup>[8]</sup> Although limited to a single department, their research is particularly robust because of the number of cases in the study population of separated officers (over 1,500).

### The Variables

Both of the aforementioned studies seek to identify specific variables that are correlated with officer behavior. Aamodt's research looks at variables associated with officer performance. Kane and White's research explores variables associated with serious misconduct. This paper provides a topical summary of variables that have been found to be statistically significant in one or both studies. It should be noted that both studies identified significant relationships involving officer race and gender. These findings will not be discussed as equal employment opportunity laws preclude consideration of such factors. A limited number of variables that lack significance will also be covered as the findings are contrary to what might be expected and may serve to challenge various preconceived notions.

Administrators are encouraged to view these data in the same way that evidence is used to shape a criminal investigation. A good detective may have a "hunch," but ultimately lets the facts direct the course of the investigation. Law enforcement executives should similarly rely on empirical evidence when making hiring decisions.

### Education

Education is the single strongest predictor of good police performance and also exhibits a strong prophylactic effect against misconduct.<sup>[7]</sup> In the aggregate, officers with a college education handily outperform their high school educated peers. They are more productive and use force less frequently.<sup>[7]</sup> College educated officers have lower rates of disciplinary actions and are far less likely to be separated for criminal misconduct or drug-use.<sup>[8]</sup> There are several plausible explanations for these observations. Completing college is a prolonged commitment that requires self-discipline and the ability to delay gratification. Furthermore, the college experience encourages critical thinking, introspection, and academic integrity.

Both studies compared officers with Associate and Bachelor degrees. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no significant difference in performance or misconduct between officers with two-year degrees and those holding four-year degrees.<sup>[7][8]</sup> Aamodt's study went further, examining the relationship between officer performance and college major. Interestingly, criminal justice majors did no better than officers with other educational backgrounds.<sup>[8]</sup> Discussions about diversifying policing are often limited to race, gender, and sexual orientation. A diversity of educational backgrounds and perspectives in the workplace may promote innovation while protecting against various organizational pathologies. Finally, Kane and White found evidence that officers who begin or return to college after starting their law enforcement career reduce their risk of future misconduct, a fact with clear implications that exceed the scope of this paper (i.e. employer-provided educational assistance programs).<sup>[8]</sup>

Educational requirements for hiring or promotion often leads to a heated debate over which is needed more in policing, *street smarts* or *book smarts*. The truth is that police officers need both skill sets to thrive. *Street smarts* are hard to define or measure, but anyone with policing experience can attest to their existence. Unfortunately, no credential or reliable assessment instrument currently exists to measure this quality. Thankfully, *book smarts* are easily quantifiable and have proven benefits.

It is recommended that law enforcement organizations consider a minimum education requirement for all sworn positions consisting of a 2 year degree (any major) from an accredited institution of higher learning.

## Background

The importance of due diligence in the hiring process cannot be overstated. Variables relevant to officer performance and misconduct are often only identifiable through the course of a comprehensive background investigation. It is critical that law enforcement organizations invest the necessary resources to investigate applicants' prior employment history and contact with the criminal justice system. Not only should the organization require a background investigation, but the evidence on misconduct suggests that organizations should rely upon hiring recommendations made by background investigators.<sup>[8]</sup>

Law enforcement organizations should conduct background investigations for all sworn applicants and follow the hiring recommendations proffered by background investigators. Prior contact with the criminal justice system should not automatically preclude a candidate from consideration. Past employment problems or arrests that involve violence, public order offenses, or larceny are red flags that should not be ignored.

**Past employment.** From a performance perspective, applicants with a pattern of employment-related disciplinary actions are less productive as police officers.<sup>[7]</sup> Prior employment problems were also predictive for disciplinary problems and career-ending misconduct.<sup>[8]</sup>

**Traffic tickets.** There is a small body of evidence suggesting that candidates with multiple traffic citations will perform at a lower rate and use more sick time, although these officers tend to receive more commendations at work.<sup>[7]</sup> Traffic offenses and parking tickets are not significantly related to career-ending misconduct.<sup>[8]</sup> At this time there is not enough evidence to make a formal recommendation on this aspect of the background process.

**Prior arrests/convictions.** Criminal background checks are standard for police applicants. This is good policy as officers with a prior criminal record are much more likely to be separated for misconduct.<sup>[8]</sup> Serious criminal offenses routinely disqualify applicants, but there is less certainty about how to proceed with low-level crimes. Research demonstrates that not all arrests are equal when it comes to the risk of future misconduct. Organizations should be wary of applicants with misdemeanor convictions or prior arrests for violent acts, property crime (e.g. larceny), and public order offenses (e.g. breach of peace).<sup>[8]</sup>

## Psychological Testing

Many law enforcement organizations include psychological testing as a component of the hiring process. The most common psychological assessment instruments utilized by mental health professionals are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) or the California Psychological Inventory (CPI). Scoring of the MMPI and CPI provide measures on a variety of scales. Elevated scores on some clinical scales are commonly used to eliminate candidates from the hiring process. Administrators are cautioned against eliminating candidates based on a single scale score. Aamodt found that, "none of the individual scale scores from measures of psychopathology nor individual psychopathology constructs (e.g., depression) are strong predictors of future law enforcement performance".<sup>[7]</sup>

It is recommended that law enforcement organizations require all candidates to undergo psychological testing. Decisions to exclude candidates should be based upon empirically tested "index scores" (i.e. Husemann, Good Cop/Bad Cop), rather than individual scale scores.

Psychological assessment instruments also quantify measures of candidate personality. Some dimensions of personality are suggestive of good police performance (e.g. the MMPI's Big 5). The strongest individual personality measure related to good performance is the CPI's "tolerance" scale.<sup>[7]</sup>

From a risk-management perspective, there are two index scores (derived by combining various MMPI inventory scales) that are useful for predicting disciplinary problems. The "Good Cop/Bad Cop" index and "Husemann" index are the most reliable indices for identifying at-risk candidates.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Military Service

American law enforcement has a proud tradition of hiring military veterans that goes back to the Civil War era. Some of the best and brightest police officers first served

their country before returning home to serve in their communities. Many police officers continue their military careers by serving in reserve units or the National Guard. There is a general perception among law enforcement administrators that military veterans make good police officers. After all, they are physically fit, accustomed to working within a bureaucratic rank structure, have a familiarity with firearms, and subscribe to a virtuous system of values. Veterans seem like ideal candidates, and many are.

The body of research on police performance and misconduct does not support the notion that military veterans possess any more potential than civilian candidates. Military service neither prevents nor promotes misconduct among police officers.<sup>[8]</sup>

The only relevant variable correlated with performance in policing was having received a high number of military commendations.<sup>[7]</sup> In this instance, outstanding performance in the military is predictive for success in policing. Many government employers award additional points to veterans in the hiring process or substitute college education requirements based upon years of military service. Based on these data, there is no empirical support that veterans (as a population) make better police officers. Veterans, especially those who have served in a time of conflict, deserve our gratitude and respect. There are many ways that police organizations can formally recognize and support military veterans serving in law enforcement.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is not uncommon for veterans to receive additional points in the testing or hiring process based upon their record of military service. This practice is incongruous with the evidence, but may be beyond the control of the hiring organization due to local civil service regulations. Military service can instill strong values and skills, yet prior service should not be used as a substitute for college educational requirements.

### **Family Background**

For many officers, policing is a family tradition. It is not uncommon for officers to have immediate and or extended family serving in law enforcement.<sup>[10]</sup> Research on police misconduct in the NYPD found that legacy hires (those with a parent who served in the NYPD) were less likely to engage in misconduct.<sup>[8]</sup> Children who grow up in policing families are already familiar with the demands and rewards that come with wearing the badge. For these employees, the consequences of misconduct go far beyond losing a good job. Misconduct, especially criminal misconduct, can permanently tarnish the family name. The familial bond with the profession likely promotes conformity to organizational norms.

As previously stated, there are always exceptions to the rule and there are some notable cases of misconduct involving family members serving in the same police organization.<sup>[11]</sup> Employing a family member, particularly in smaller organizations, raises the specter of nepotism and can create perceptions of special treatment. With approximately 18,000 law enforcement organizations in the United States, there is no shortage of employment opportunities for applicants who come from policing families.

### **Life Course**

There are a several variables in the police performance literature that mirror findings in criminological research. Life-course criminology focuses on behavioral changes, particularly desistance from crime, over the life of the offender. Age is one variable that is negatively associated with criminal offending and police misconduct. (i.e. as age increases, likelihood of offending/misconduct drops). Thus, older officers are less likely to engage in misconduct than younger officers. Research has also identified several "turning points" in the life course that can lead to desistance. Marriage is one such turning point. Interestingly, research has not found cohabitation to be as effective in this regard.<sup>[12]</sup> Being married at the time of appointment or getting married during a

Law enforcement organizations should explore ways to recruit applicants from policing families. However, the selection process should be closed to anyone with a family member (civilian or sworn) that currently works for the hiring organization.

police career is associated with lower levels of misconduct.<sup>[8]</sup> Relational bonds can be a powerful source of social control. No officer wants to return home with the news that they have been suspended or fired from work. In the aggregate, married officers are likely more risk-averse when it comes to misconduct than their unmarried counterparts.

For additional information on this topic, please contact George Tammaro, Risk Management Supervisor, CIRMA at 203-498-3076, or at [gtammaro@ccm-ct.org](mailto:gtammaro@ccm-ct.org).

### Conclusion

The foregoing recommendations for police recruitment and selection have been offered as a path towards reducing misconduct and liability. Many of the variables associated with misconduct are also related to performance, suggesting that it is not necessary to sacrifice organizational effectiveness while limiting exposure to risk. Effective hiring processes may be slow, yet they produce enduring, long-term benefits and reduce liability and improve organizational effectiveness. There are other steps that law enforcement organizations can take to this end. Additional ideas and resources such as the Law Enforcement Best Practices guides may be found on CIRMA's website at [www.CIRMA.org](http://www.CIRMA.org). Inquiries regarding research or policy may be directed to the author via email ([jjohnson@darienct.gov](mailto:jjohnson@darienct.gov)).

### End Notes

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