

Psychological Pre-employment Screening and Background Investigations

Neil S. Hibler, Ph.D., ABPP

Law enforcement agencies require resilient personnel who are reliable and ethical, able to use sound judgment under all kinds of demanding circumstances. Psychologists can contribute to selecting the best qualified candidates when their criteria are the same as those used by the department when defining the tasks to be performed, and involve procedures proven to accurately and uniformly measure factors that influence the necessary behavior. Such influences include the presence of emotional and cognitive resources required by this duty, and the absence of risk factors which could undermine performance. Importantly, such risk factors must be considered with potentially mitigating issues that could potentially reduce the impact of the concern. While each case must, by law, be individually considered in terms of strengths and weaknesses, every case must be held to the same, uniform standard.

Background investigations, conducted by law enforcement agencies, have similar requirements. The information sought regarding applicants must be relevant to the tasks they would perform, to include mandates for issues not effectively measured by psychological assessment. These requirements include trustworthiness, honor, and proven sound judgment and reliability when carrying out responsibilities and being a citizen in the community.

Both psychological and background investigative findings are important, but as a practical matter, the background investigation is much more important than the psychological examination. Most of the inmates in the county jail would pass the psychological testing; it is their actual conduct that makes the difference. In combination, psychological and background investigative information have the greatest value together, how the information should be combined is another matter.

There is no research literature in open sources that proves superiority of any particular way of psychological testing, background investigating or how these practices could be combined. There is classified research that finds the background investigation is some 16 times more relevant and important to finding problems of relevance and predicting reliable behavior. There is also anecdotal evidence, with unpublished research support, suggesting advantage to practices that make the psychological assessment completely reliant on applicant interview information and test results, which is then reported in detail for comparison to the background investigative findings conducted by the background investigator. I have personally conducted two studies with a major metropolitan police department, both found that five (5) times more candidates lie to interviewing psychologists (and accordingly are disqualified) than for all other reasons (including mental health factors) combined. I am told that recently the CIA examined their applicant data, and found the identical statistic. The point is that when psychologists interview regarding factors investigated by the department, the key factor is deceit, not mental illness. Accordingly, the interview process, used by both psychologists and background investigators and subsequently comparing those results, seems to have value greater than either process alone. Reliability is the issue, not mental health.