

## ***"Police Applicants' Q & A"***

### **Frequently asked questions about the pre-employment psychological evaluation of police officer applicants**

#### **Introduction**

You want to become a police officer? Have you already passed the physical fitness and entry tests? If not, you need to find out the physical fitness standards for running, sit-ups, and push-ups, among other elements. Also, there are study guides for the entrance test and many law enforcement departments will provide the information you need to know. If you have passed the first few stages, congratulations! You have already shown the department that you meet the basic education and fitness standards. You may have already sat before an interview board of one or more police officers where questions were asked about how you handle situations and why you want to become a police officer. Again, congratulations to you for meeting those standards.

If you have not yet applied to become a police officer, the above information presents the important first steps in the process. After meeting the initial requirements, the department will give you a letter, known as the "Conditional Offer of Employment." This letter does not mean you have been hired. Do not quit your current job! The department now considers you to have met certain standards and may hire you but first, you must be found medically and psychologically suitable for the position. Please keep in mind that if you are found unsuitable for a law enforcement agency, there may be other departments that will find you suitable.

The questions and answers below are frequent asked by applicants like you. This information may help you better prepare for the psychological evaluation.

#### **Q: What is a psychological exam?**

The exact content and procedure of pre-employment screenings can vary widely from agency to agency but they typically consist of two main components: an interview with a psychologist and one or more standardized (usually paper-and-pencil) psychological tests. During the interview, the psychologist will ask you a range of questions about your background, work history, school achievements, current lifestyle, and aspects about your emotions and behaviors. Many of the test and interview questions may be repeated several times. Stay attentive to the questions because consistent answers are important.

#### **Q: Why does a police department require a psychological exam?**

Law enforcement is a high-stress, people-oriented career. Before a department invests the time and money in hiring an officer, it wants to be reasonably sure that the applicant will be able to perform the psychological requirements of the job.

#### **Q: What do psychologists know about police work?**

Over the years, many research studies have produced indicators about psychological traits that are associated with a successful police officer. For example, a person who is overly emotional or too easily stressed by frustration would have problems with the job. The most successful police officers can remain calm, use good judgment and not over-react when facing extreme situations. Someone who has a history of serious mental health problems would probably not be suited to be a police officer.

Please keep in mind that departments have different requirements. If you are found to be unsuitable for one department, there may be other departments which find you suitable. Also, keep in mind that

not everyone who is psychologically stable can do the job of a police officer. You may be better suited for other jobs.

**Q: How can I get ready for the test? What should I study?**

There is no special preparation needed. You will do best if you are well-rested, have eaten, and are prepared to spend several hours doing the pencil and paper tests. Answer the questions asked without too much thought and don't try to out-guess the questions and give "right" answers. Be honest and be patient with some things that seem to be repeated over and over.

**Q: How should I dress?**

The psychological evaluation is part of an employment interview. Would you wear jeans, T-shirt and tennis shoes to any other type of job interview? Probably not! Presenting yourself with a neat appearance is important.

**Q: I saw a counselor when I was a child when my parents were divorcing. Should I hide that if asked?**

No, be honest. Participating in counseling as a child or anytime during your life is not something that will automatically exclude someone from being a police officer. Being untruthful about counseling or any other part of your background can exclude you if information is found that you were untruthful.

**Q: I am taking an antidepressant medication. Will that be a problem when I apply to become a police officer?**

Medications prescribed for certain mental health problems may be a reason to not recommend you for employment. However, there is no fixed rule used by psychologists. One rule of thumb is that if someone is off medications for two years prior to the evaluation, there is less concern about their capacity to do the job. Do not stop your medication because you are applying for a police position without consulting your medical doctor.

**Q: Is the psychological evaluation done to find out if I'm crazy?**

The evaluation is a measure of your emotional make-up, your thinking and learning, and how you handle yourself in very difficult situations. The psychologist is in the profession because of a deep interest in human behavior. The psychological evaluation is to help the police department hire people who are psychologically suitable for the position of police officer. The evaluation is rarely about finding someone who is "crazy".

**Q: I have heard that the psychological tests have hundreds of questions, is that right and why?**

Yes, the tests you will take may have from about 300-to-600 questions. Sometimes you will complete two or more tests which may mean 1,000 questions or more will be asked. There are several reasons why the tests seem long. One reason is that the scales the psychologist is interested in, such as "depression", may contain 40 questions. No one particular question may mean anything but in combination with a pattern of responding to many other questions could be significant. Always be honest, usually the first answer that comes to you is the best answer, and do not try to out-guess the test. The tests have scales that are designed to identify if a person is answering in a manner to appear, "too perfect". The psychologist reviewing the testing data will know that about you, so answering in a defensive manner can be a negative trait.