



## **Public Safety Psychological Services**

Hiring Public Safety Professionals in a Post-COVID, Post-Floyd Reality

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# Learning Objectives:

1. List 3 ways in which the quality of the applicant pool has decreased post-pandemic.
2. Describe problems that are exacerbated by hiring from a poor applicant pool in the current climate.
3. Describe how hiring authorities can implement procedural change in their hiring process to get the best of the current applicant pool while saving resources

# Macro-economic Factors Affecting Hiring

- Labor shortages – Some employers, e.g. Amazon, pay much more than public safety positions
- Unemployment benefits
- Demands for work-life balance
  - This was already happening with the Millennial generation – now it's pretty much everyone
- Early retirement; resignations after a short time
- Child-care/home school concerns
- Inter-generational/Shared housing trends
- Return to school/higher education – changing careers

# Baltimore firefighter shot in face with air pellet gun while on medical call

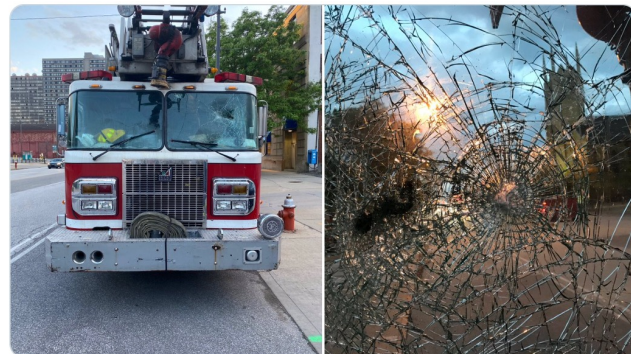
D.C. firefighters attacked while trying to put out a fire in Northeast

Firefighters attacked, apparatus damaged during civil unrest

## Fire Fighters Seek Protections Against Attacks



**#CLEFIRE** Ladder 23 Out Of Service after being struck with bottles and rocks while responding to a fire downtown. Windshield smashed.



Violent attacks against Seattle firefighters on the rise, union says

**Assaults on Firefighters Skyrocket So High That It May Impact Critical Services (Commentary)**



An aerial photograph of a large crowd of people gathered on a city street. Many individuals are holding up umbrellas, creating a dense field of dark and light-colored shapes. The street is visible in the upper portion of the image, with some buildings and utility poles in the background. The image is partially obscured by a white curved border on the right side.

# Who Wants to Be a Cop Anymore?

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- 2020 Changed the Landscaping of Policing
  - Prior to George Floyd's Death and after the COVID19 lockdowns, everyone loved our first responders
- After May 2020, public sentiment quickly changed
- Seattle - CHOP/CHAZ, Defund the Police movements
- Washington State laws changed causing officers concerns about criminal penalties related to use of force
- Increase in attacks on Law Enforcement

# Additional Factors Effecting Public Safety Hiring

- Pandemic mental health concerns and drug usage
  - Significant data to suggest that the COVID19 pandemic and COVID19 itself has exacerbated and, in some cases, caused mental health concerns
  - Substance abuse rates skyrocketed during the COVID19 lockdown
- Normalization of other drug usage – MANY more applicants have a history of significant and more recent drug usage
- Changing laws related to policing in Washington State – causing some current officers to leave and some applicants to choose other states
- Increased number of public safety professionals seeking early retirement or time off for L&I PTSD related concerns
- Several state agencies (in various states) lost employees to the COVID19 vaccine mandates
- Some applicants choose Corrections or Fire over Patrol due to their concerns about interacting with the public after 2020 – these applicants (generally) tend to be better qualified applicants

# Feedback from Evaluators and Agencies:

- *I think the most obvious is that the quality of the candidates have decreased substantially in terms of the types of behaviors reported in background, as well as the recency of those behaviors. Excuse making and a lack of responsibility taking appears to have increased as well - or a seeming disregard for the seriousness/consequences of the behavioral history. My sense is that there is an entitlement that accompanies this.*
- *I've noticed a profound lack of understanding of the landscape of policing - particularly amongst folks with lower Wonderlic scores. The idea that a candidate will be a "hero" and "bridge" some gap for whatever injustices they perceive there to be in a community, with ignorance to how complex policing has become is a common theme. Similarly, many of the applicants appear to possess less capacity to engage people/communities where sophisticated skillsets are needed - this is particularly applicable to interpersonal skillsets. Many of the applicants' interpersonal skills (and judgement) appear much more limited [when compared to] applicants several years ago.*

## Feedback from Evaluators and Agencies, cont.

- *Candidates are far more argumentative and inflexible.*
- *Candidates generally have a harder time following instructions or disregarding them.*
- *Huge increase in the number of and the need for Fitness for Duty Evaluations*
- *Higher number of No Shows or Applicants Showing up Late*
- *Lack of professional dress in interviews*



# Examples:

- Response to our request for them to write a brief essay about why they want the position for which they are applying.
  - *“Because I show up and move efficiently and effectively when I need to. Honestly, the fact that I am having to do this again and explain the exact same thing I don’t know look at my last time I filled it out I put a lot of love in that one.”*
- Threatening to sue us if we can’t accommodate an interview after 6pm or on a weekend
- Showing up 20-30 mins late without notification or explanation and threatening to sue when we make them reschedule
- Demanding to see their reports even when the consent forms signed ahead of their evaluation clearly indicates that they will not receive a copy or feedback

# Data Analysis

- Looked at data from 2018-2019 and compared to late 2020 – early 2022
- Included agencies who had relaxed/expanded their standards and those who did not
- Some regional differences in places that had more political issues related to the 2020 riots and/or who encouraged use of COVID19 unemployment benefits
- *General Trends: current applicants are less dominant, less sociable and less responsible – all results that indicate applicants will be less responsive to the needs of citizens*

# Firefighter/EMT Data

- Fire escapes the anti-police sentiment and they have an ability to capitalize on good candidates that might otherwise have chosen law enforcement. They still have to contend with the results of the pandemic that might constrain numbers and should resist lowering standards.
- **Where lower standards prevail:**
  - Test indicators indicate that the post-Floyd/pandemic candidates are more likely to be terminated. They are less assertive, confident, resilient, tolerant, insightful, satisfied with their emotional well-being, work oriented, and personable.
- **Where standards are maintained:**
  - There was actually an improvement in candidate quality
  - Post-2020 riots/pandemic candidates' test indicators suggest a lower likelihood of negative behavioral outcomes such as drug and alcohol problems. Candidates were more assertive, confident, responsible, self-controlled, empathetic, tolerant, stress resilient, and personable.

# LEO Data:

- Hiring in this job class is the most affected by negative public perception, budget cuts due to defunding efforts.
- Numbers have dropped significantly because incumbents have retired, new officers were not hired for a year following the 2020 Riots post the death of George Floyd, and new hiring faces extreme headwinds from public perception. They also are experiencing the same problems as private sector business with a lack of applicants.
- Agency response to this situation can drastically affect the candidates that are being hired. Although numbers may be lower.
  - **Where lower standards prevail:**
    - Test indicators indicate lower assertiveness, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, adherence to rules and norms, work motivation, and law enforcement orientation. They are also more impulsive, reckless, and anxious.
  - **Where standards are maintained:**
    - Negative effects were largely avoided. However, applicants were still somewhat less assertive and confident.

# Dispatcher Updates

- Full data not yet available – stay tuned 😊
- Very difficult to recruit
- Sharp increase in new hires not making it through training
- Overall rating scores (A, B, C, C-, D, F) appear to be lower (\*\*not validated yet)



# Correctional Officer Data

- Somewhat shielded from the negative public perception.
  - **Where lower standards prevail:**
    - Test indicators indicate higher probabilities of negative behavioral outcomes such as job problems, alcohol and substance abuse, integrity, problems, and anger management problems. They are also more impulsive, responsible, self-controlled, and personable than the applicants Pre-2020.
  - **Where standards are maintained:**
    - Much less negative. Applicants were largely similar to Pre-2020 applicants however statistically significant differences indicate the Post-Floyd/2020 applicants are less satisfied with the emotional well-being, less law enforcement oriented, and less work motivated.

# So, what do we do?

- STRONGLY encourage you not to lower your hiring standards in ways that make a proven qualitative difference
  - ***Do not overlook*** prior mental health concerns\*\*\* *if your psychological evaluation provider does not request prior/relevant mental health records, it's a lawsuit waiting to happen*
  - Consider being more flexible with requirements related to applicant's history of drug usage, formal education requirements, and credit history
- Danger of hiring poorly qualified applicants
  - More likely to have negative citizen interactions
  - Less likely to be able to tolerate the stress of the job
  - More likely to cause difficulties in the team environment
- Process changes:
  - Consider additional screening of applicants before their conditional offer of employment to choose the best qualified candidates to best invest resources

# Ideas for Consideration

- Recruit based on the idea of 3-5 years of work from an employee
- Strongly encourage all disciplines start to consider part-time or job share positions
- By hiring poor quality applicants, you are simply pushing the problem down stream
- Ensure that your civil service process is not removing applicants who may be qualified
- Focus on wellness programs that your Department can offer
- Consider longer probationary periods or extended training periods
- Focus on LOTS of positive feedback

Questions:

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