

The Police Recruitment Process: Rochester, NY

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Abstract

The last few decades have brought about a renaissance in the police recruitment process. With the near universal use of Civil Service Exams, physical agility exams, psychological testing, background investigations and the burgeoning use of assessment centers and other elaborate means of assessment, candidates now undergo a process far more sophisticated than that of prior decades. What follows is an analysis of the police officer recruitment process as it is implemented by the City Police Department in Rochester, NY. In this paper we examine attrition throughout the process, as well as the disparate attrition between Majority and Minority candidates.

In 1973 the National Advisory Committee on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals suggested that in the process of hiring police officers departments utilize a screening system that includes an oral interview, background check, physical exam, as well as tests of psychological, personality, and cognitive ability (Sanders, Hughes, & Langworthy, 1995). Over the last forty years the screening process for police officer applicants has evolved to replace the favoritism of yesteryear (Decker & Huckabee, 1999). The most common screening processes of today include the Civil Service Exam, physical agility tests, psychological examinations and interviews, medical examinations, situational tests, polygraph examinations, assessment centers, and comprehensive background investigations (Jordan, Fridell, Faggiani, & Kubu, 2009; Decicco, 2000; Alpert, 1991).

For nearly two centuries the primary mode of police officer candidate selection has been the screening-out model. Under this multiple hurdle approach applicants must pass a number of tests and those who are not able to do so are no longer considered (Jordan, Fridell, Faggiani, & Kubu, 2009; Metchik, 2000; Sanders, Hughes, & Langworthy, 1995). The reasoning behind this model is the belief that applicants who are able to pass every test must have the highest potential for success (Jordan, Fridell, Faggiani, & Kubu, 2009; Poland, 1978). When applying a screening-out model the benefits are clear: only a small percentage of individuals can pass every test given (Decicco, 2000). The screening out model serves to remove applicants who display problematic behavior – reducing the likelihood of hiring Police Officers who would be unsuccessful in their duties (Decicco, 2000; Sanders, Hughes, & Langworthy, 1995; Hogue, Black, & Sigler, 1994).

This study was conducted to ascertain at which steps Rochester Police Department applicants are most likely to drop out. Data was obtained from Rochester's Bureau of Human Resource Management on the recruitment process from 2000 through the hiring process for the

May 2008 exam – a total of ten recruitment classes. While there were two more recent recruitment groups listed these were not included as one was still in the recruitment process and no individuals were hired from the other. The two main goals in conducting this study were to determine the attrition of individuals by Majority/Minority status at each recruitment hurdle and to identify the points at which applicants were most inclined to be unsuccessful.

Appendix A illustrates six unique variables within the Rochester Police Department hiring process. Each step is listed, from the total number of initial applicants to those who were hired. Every step is proportional in size to its immediate predecessor; if 62% of individuals passed an applicant hurdle it would be shown as .62 times the size of the prior step. Time is illustrated through proportion as well: differential lengths based on the total number of days between each application hurdle. There are five steps which make up the Background Process: the Psychological Exam, Medical Exam, Psychological Interview, the Polygraph/Personal Interview, and the Background Investigation which consists of, among other things, credit and reference checks as well as educational and military history. Data on attrition rates were available for the Medical, but not for the remaining steps that make up the Background Process. While we were unable to display attrition for each of the four steps, the steps are illustrated in Appendix A as to where they occurred during the Background Process and approximately how long they ran for. Attrition by Minority/Majority status is shown in the pie charts and a table illustrates the difference in attrition between the two groups. Candidates identify their race; any who list themselves as White/Non-Hispanic are considered Majority, Minority candidates include African Americans, Asians, Hispanic, and Native American.

Before an individual is eligible to apply for the Civil Service Exam he must first meet a number of prerequisites. In Rochester the prerequisites to be considered for the Civil Service

Exam are as follows: an education which has resulted in a minimum of a High School Diploma or GED, US Citizenship, are between the ages of 19 ½ and 35, a valid driver's license, no felony convictions, good physical condition, and strong moral character (City of Rochester Website, N.D.). As can be seen in Appendix A, a total of 15,553 individuals applied between 2000 and 2008 (excluding those who participated in the November, 2008 exam) for the Rochester Civil Service Exam and met these prerequisites. All of those 15,553 were invited to participate in the Civil Service Exam.

The Civil Service Exam is a measurement tool that identifies an applicant's ability to comprehend and interpret the myriad of scenarios he may face as an officer (Metchik, 2000). In the Rochester Police Department this test is held on a Saturday approximately forty days after applications are closed. In our chart, this step serves as an introduction of available racial data. Majority candidates make up 75% of the total number of individuals who appeared for the Civil Service Exam while the remaining 25% is comprised of Minority candidates. Unfortunately, there is no information available on the racial makeup of attrition between the steps "Total Applied" and "Appeared for Civil Service Exam." Available data does indicate that 4,242 individuals – 27% of all applicants – who applied for the Civil Service Exam did not appear for the subsequent test; such a great drop off in attendance should be examined later on in greater detail.

Of those who passed the Civil Service Exam 80% were Majority candidates and the remaining 20% were Minority candidates. 9,439 of the 11,311 applicants who appeared for the exam passed: approximately 83%. Of all Majority candidates who appeared for the Civil Service Exam 10.71% failed. While that number may seem high it pales in comparison to the total number of Minority candidates who failed: 34.08%. As we lack sufficient data to fully assess

attrition by race it would be unwise for us to make any inferences on the differential failure rates between Majority and Minority candidates at this point in time besides acknowledging that there is a significant difference between the two.

Only candidates who pass the Civil Service Exam are invited to the Physical Agility Exam. The processing of Majority candidates above a certain score helps the Rochester Police Department to decrease the costs of the pre-employment process while evening out the number of Majority and Minority candidates. This step is essentially passive in that applicants will only become aware of whether or not they continue on by their subsequent invitation to the Physical Agility Exam. At this point in time all Minority applicants who achieve a passing score (70 or above) are invited to the Physical Agility Exam. Depending on hiring needs, Majority candidates with a passing score of between 75% and 90% are invited to the Physical Agility Exam. The recent need for more officers in Rochester resulted in the lowering of the processing score for Majority candidates.

The Rochester Police Department has operated under a court-ordered Consent Decree since the early 1970s. This decree stipulates that for every four candidates hired one Minority candidate must be hired. In order to comply with Rochester Police Department's Consent Decree, of the 6,420 individuals who were "Invited to Agility Exam" 69% were Majority candidates and 31% were Minority candidates. Of all Majority candidates who passed the Civil Service Exam 41.71% were not invited to the Physical Agility Exam. Only 68% of the individuals who passed the Civil Service Exam were invited to the Physical Agility Exam.

As with most departments the Rochester Police Department utilizes a Physical Agility Exam in their screening process. While there are a number of exercises used by departments including pull-ups, pushups, sit-ups, a 1.5 to 2 mile run, obstacle courses, tests of hand strength,

bench presses, and the sit-and-reach; many of these tests have a disparate impact on female applicants (Decicco, 2000; Ash, Slora, & Britton, 1990). To counter this, the Rochester Police Department uses the “Cooper Standards” in their Physical Agility Exam; this provides an equal assessment of strength for men and women (Jordan, Fridell, Faggiani, & Kubu, 2009). The Rochester Police Department's Physical Agility Exam is comprised of pushups, sit-ups, and a 1.5 mile run. This exam typically takes place one month after candidates are invited to the Physical Agility Exam. Of the 6,420 individuals who were invited to the Physical Agility Exam 3,286 appeared: 51%. Sixty nine percent of all applicants who appeared for the Physical Agility Exam were Majority candidates and the remaining 31% were Minority candidates. Of all Majority candidates who were processed and invited to the Physical Agility Exam 42.9% did not appear; of all Minority candidates who were processed and invited 45.27% did not appear.

Sixty one percent of all individuals who appeared for the agility exam passed. Of these, 75% were Majority candidates and 25% were Minority candidates. 50.25% of all Minority candidates who appeared for the agility exam failed it, while 34.23% of all Majority candidates who appeared for the exam failed. The Rochester Police Department recently tried to address the general lack of appearance at the Physical Agility Exam by changing its location from a college in the suburbs of Rochester to a high school located in the city. This may help to ameliorate many of the travel concerns of those in the city without reliable transportation. It would be highly beneficial if this recent data on attendance rates were examined to see how it compares with our listed rates. One other possible means to address attrition at this step in the recruitment process may be to examine the past data on applicant attendance and to identify specific days and times when applicants are most likely to both appear for the exam and pass it. Other ways the Rochester Police Department has addressed the lack of attendance include providing handouts on

the Physical Agility Exam after candidates have completed the Civil Service Exam, hosting Physical Agility Workshops, providing videos on their website which illustrate the proper way to perform each exercise, and contacting applicants through both Hyper-Reach and manual phone calls.

The Background Process serves to determine whether an applicant has a suitable history to be a police officer; such invasive measures are utilized to ensure that only qualified individuals are hired as officers (Decicco, 2000; Poland, 1978). By questioning an applicant on his educational level, residency, employment record, drug use, alcohol use, credit history, and then verifying each piece of information, departments are able to determine the overall honesty with which applicants report information on themselves (Decicco, 2000). As can be seen in Appendix A, the Rochester Police Department begins their Background Investigation as soon as applicants pass the Physical Agility Exam. This process continues until an applicant is, or is not, hired. Once an applicant successfully completes the Physical Agility Exam he is required to provide the police with biographical information on himself. The candidate is then provided with a conditional offer of employment and is scheduled for the Psychological and Medical Exams.

Although the Medical Exam can occur several weeks after Psychological Tests have begun, the fact that data it is listed as separate from the Background Investigation necessitates the explanation of it prior to the attrition which occurs during the remaining portions of the Background Investigation. The exam utilized by the Rochester Police Department consists of a hearing test, a myriad of sight tests, reflex tests, an electrocardiogram, and a drug test. Ninety five percent of all individuals who passed the Physical Agility Exam passed the Medical Exam. Of all individuals who passed the Medical Exam, 75% were Majority and 25% were Minority candidates. Of all Minority candidates who passed the Physical Agility Exam, 6.79% failed the

Medical; this is similar to the 5.00% of all Majority candidates who passed the Physical Agility Exam and subsequently failed the Medical.

The Rochester Police Department performs a battery of psychological tests in the first few weeks after candidates have completed their Physical Agility Exams. Three psychological tests are administered: the revised Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, the California Personality Inventory, and the Inwald Personality Inventory. These tests serve primarily to identify a candidate's negative personality traits and their propensity for corruption (Ho, 2005). The Wonderlic Personnel Test – a brief intelligence test – as well as an in-house created biological data form are also administered at this point in time.

While the use of psychological testing has been justified in court over the years, there are three problems inherent in how such measures are utilized. Research has indicated that false positives occur fairly often in the use of psychological testing – individuals are rejected who would have been acceptable if hired (Metchik, 2000; Hiatt & Hargrave, 1988; Hargrave & Hiatt, 1987). As they are now, psychological tests do not distinguish between those who would be average officers and those who would be exceptional officers (Metchik, 2000). Even if departments know what they want in an officer the tests primarily focus on identifying what they do not want (Hogue, Black, & Sigler, 1994). Finally, psychological measures are frequently validated through police academy performance – this validation does not necessarily reflect an officer's actual performance in the field (White & Escobar, 2008; Metchik, 2000).

The Rochester Police Department has tried to address a number of the aforementioned issues by having all applicants who participate in the Psychological Test participate in a Psychological Interview that occurs in the weeks following the Test. The Psychological Interview allows the applicant to explain any confusion which may have arisen while he was

taking the test; this also provides the psychologist a grasp on the applicant's overall mental health and suitability for the position. While psychologist recommendations are not legally binding, many departments trust their decisions (Ho, 2001).

Although usage of the polygraph is prohibited in the private sector it is still allowed in police recruitment (Decicco, 2000). For the Rochester Police Department the polygraph is utilized in conjuncture with the Personal Interview beginning approximately one month after the Psychological Interviews have been completed. It is employed largely as a means to determine whether applicants are as honest as they have purported themselves to be (Hogue, Black, & Sigler, 1994). Ironically, as one Rochester Lieutenant stated, some individuals have been unsuccessful in the polygraph due to untruthful statements which, if they were truthful, would not have necessarily been reason for disqualification. At the point the polygraph is employed the Background Investigation has been active for several months – officers know most of the information they need to about the applicant, they just want to ensure that the applicant is truthful.

By its very nature the screening model is highly bureaucratic; it is designed to remove applicants in a swift manner without any attention given to mitigating factors (Vest, 2001). Between 2000 and 2008 the Rochester Police Department hired a total of 334 individuals who were deemed eligible for the position, a number considerably smaller than the initial 15,553. Of those applicants hired, 84% were Majority and the remaining 16% were Minority. Of all Majority candidates who had passed all prior application hurdles 56.13% were not hired for an unlisted reason while 22.79% of the remaining Minority candidates were not hired for an unlisted reason. These unlisted reasons include, but are not limited to: military and educational deferment.

At approximately nine months the police application process for Rochester remains lengthy. Although the first three months of this process involves the administration and processing of the Civil Service Exam – bringing the total time that the Rochester Police Department is in control of this process down to six months – the total length of the process appears to promote applicant dropout (Decker & Huckabee, 1999). At 589 candidates, the number of individuals who have officially withdrawn from the process is small. Only 9.17% of all applicants who were Invited to the Agility Exam subsequently withdrew, but if we compile the total number of individuals who officially withdrew with those who did not appear for the Civil Service Exam and who were eligible for the Agility Exam but did not appear we would have an exponentially greater number. A total of 7,376 individuals fit into the prior three categories. This means that, between 2000 and 2008, of all those who were involved in the police application process for the Rochester Police Department a total of 47% dropped out on their own volition.

The ultimate goal of recruitment is to hire the best possible candidates; it is frequently assumed that the larger applicant pool a department has, the greater choice they will have when it comes to hiring decisions (White & Escobar, 2008; Ho, 2005). Of course, a large applicant pool is not necessarily the most ideal of scenarios; departments should focus on the quality of applicants, rather than quantity (Decicco, 2000; Decker & Huckabee, 1999). It seems as though the greatest impediment in the application process is the lack of a proper definition of what a police officer's role is in society. While officers have been portrayed in a number of different fashions, the media most frequently promotes them as crime fighters. Such a role does not fully encapsulate all of the duties an officer performs. Departments need to inform the public of what they realistically wish to see in applicants and applicants need to be made aware of what policing

entails (Vest, 2001). It seems likely that those who apply for the position with only a fraction of the knowledge of what policing entails will be at a higher risk for becoming disenchanting and subsequently dropping out of the process than those who are well informed (White & Escobar, 2008).

In the last fifty years the recruitment process has changed exponentially (Sanders, Hughes, & Langworthy, 1995). Departments are working continuously to develop applicable measures to test applicants with, including psychological tests designed to screen-in desirable candidates as well as tests designed specifically to assess police officer applicants (Inwald, 2008; Poland, 1978). If continual effort is put forth to ensure quality in the screening process this will only serve to aid departments in achieving greater applicant pools (Ho, 2005; Vest, 2001; Decker & Huckabee, 1999).

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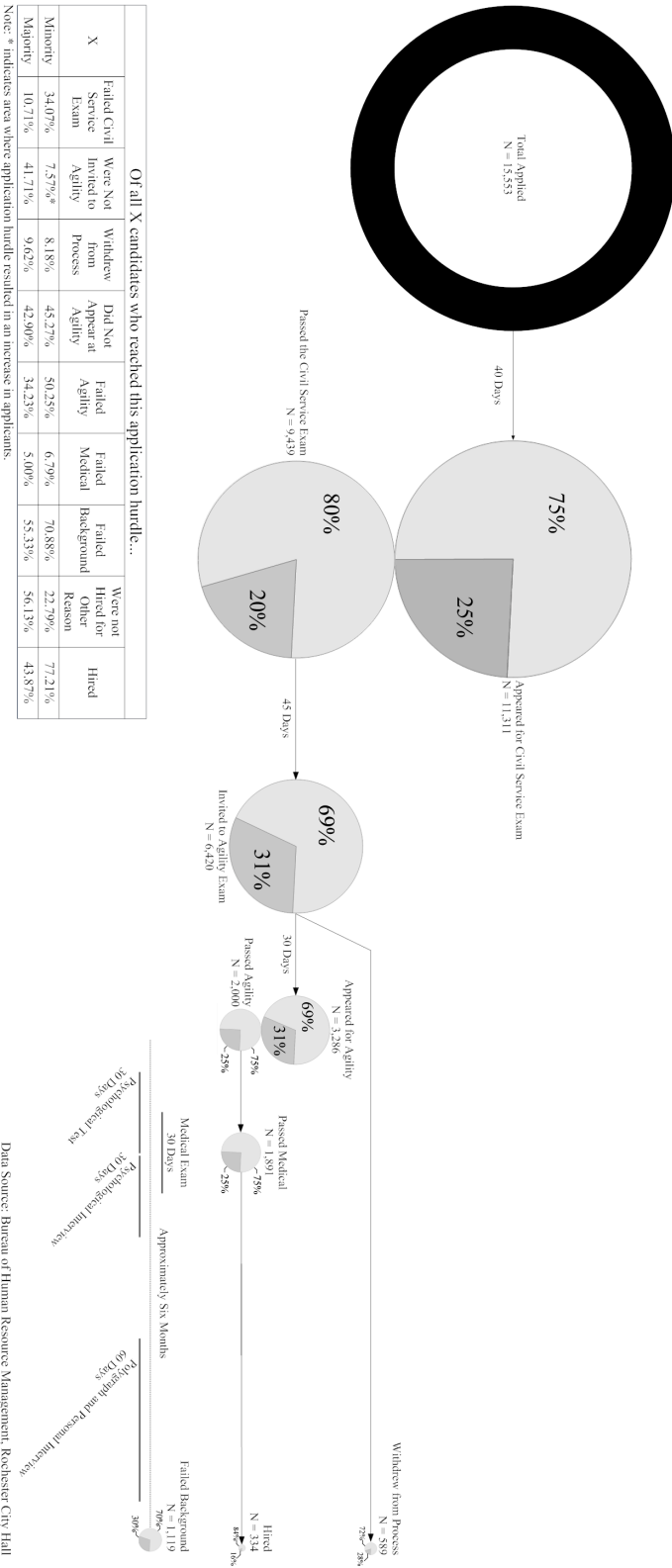
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Appendix A

Rochester Police Department: Attrition by Race in the Hiring Process 2000-2008

Legend:
 [Light Gray] Minority Applicants
 [Dark Gray] Majority Applicants



Of all X candidates who reached this application hurdle...

	Failed Civil Service Exam	Were Not Invited to Agility	Withdrew from Process	Did Not Appear at Agility	Failed Agility	Failed Medical	Failed Background	Were not Hired for Other Reason	Hired
X	34.07%	7.57%*	8.18%	45.27%	50.25%	6.79%	70.88%	22.79%	77.21%
Minority	10.71%	41.71%	9.62%	42.90%	34.23%	5.00%	55.33%	56.13%	43.87%

Note: * indicates area where application hurdle resulted in an increase in applicants.

Data Source: Bureau of Human Resource Management, Rochester City Hall