

The Changing Face of Public Safety Candidates

By Joseph W. Banasiak, Public Safety Director

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Key Points:

- Public safety applicants were once very homogeneous with similar education, levels of fitness, and types of professions practiced by extended family
- Common backgrounds allowed for consistency in predicting on the job success
- Three gradual changes have made a tremendous impact on the applicant pool
- The applicant pool has become more diverse including women and minorities
- The use of recreational drugs and excessive drinking have become more tolerated by client decision-making bodies
- The glorification by the media and entertainment industry embellishing the excitement of the job has attracted thrill-seekers

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In this inaugural newsletter to public safety clients and others who employ people in high risk professions, like police officers, firefighter/paramedics, and emergency dispatch operators, we want to speak about the changes we've observed in the last 30 years of helping agencies select qualified applicants for these positions. While the observed changes have been gradual over time, in total, they have been game-changing. Specifically, there have been three changes which have had a tremendous impact on the kinds of public safety candidates we have evaluated for entry-level roles. In particular, there has been the *increased diversity of the applicant pool*, which is reflective of our society and culture as well. In addition, we have observed a *greater tolerance for once taboo behaviors such as excessive drinking and recreational drug use*. Lastly, the *glorification by the media (television, newspapers, and the Internet) and the motion picture industry of the embellished excitement and thrills associated with working in the field of public safety* has been significant. For example, how many of your children or family members (or perhaps even yourselves) have expressed an interest in working alongside *Horatio* on *CSI Miami*? Let's look at each of these trends in more detail.

When we began conducting psychological testing 30 years ago on entry-level public safety applicants in police, fire, and emergency medicine, the applicant was a highly homogeneous one. Inevitably, the candidates were male, with the very rare exception of a female police officer applicant interjected into the hiring pool. Most of the males also met certain strict requirements for physical fitness, to include being of a minimum height and weight. During the 70's and 80's, most of these male applicants were educated in parochial institutions, and the majority came from homes where their fathers, brothers, and other extended family members were in public safety positions, while most of their mothers, if they worked at all, were either nurses or teachers. These common backgrounds allowed for high consistency in predicting success on the job. While there were always exceptions to this general rule, the homogenous backgrounds of the typical public safety candidate generally held true.

Today, the game has changed, and it has changed dramatically. Females

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comprise a significant part of the applicant pool. While generally of smaller stature, many are physically-fit and have won recognition and acclaim on the athletic field as high school and college student-athletes. In addition, many women applicants have distinguished themselves in activities such as debate, or have held supervisory or leadership roles in the military or in the private sector. Ethnic minorities of all types now actively seek public safety positions. For many of these individuals, they represent first-generation Americans with parents from other lands, in particular, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia. In many instances, English is their second language.

The advantages of widening the public safety applicant pool are numerous. With more females in the mix, the ability to navigate complex and potentially dangerous domestic interventions along with handling sensitive sex crimes is enhanced by candidates who can both empathize, as well as, de-escalate and talk down emotionally-charged situations. For those from another country of origin, their understanding of their native language and culture can be useful in defusing threatening conditions. Where bedlam might have reigned and allowed little problems to go from bad to worse, better informed public safety personnel can talk to the aggrieved parties and work toward mutually beneficial outcomes and solutions.

However, the other two changes we have observed we would characterize as less favorable, as they raise concerns about short and long-term on-the-job success in the public safety field. As alcohol consumption and recreational drug use have grown in popularity, often beginning in middle school, it is not unusual for public safety candidates to have drunk in excess repeatedly during their youth, especially during their college years, and for many of these same individuals to have engaged in drug use, including smoking marijuana on multiple occasions as well as experimenting with other illegal substances, such as cocaine, LSD, or even prescription drugs. We ask applicants (while explaining that their answers would be corroborated by the polygraph examination) if they ever used illegal drugs. Just one or two uses of marijuana was previously enough to disqualify a candidate from further consideration. Today, tolerance limits have been expanded by client decision-makers as drinking and recreational drug use have become more socially acceptable; thus increasing the size of the applicant pool. On the other hand, smoking marijuana or being arrested for a DUI while majoring in law enforcement or criminal justice in college is still a significant "red flag" to many police and fire commissions. Bear in mind that there remains a good proportion of public safety candidates nowadays who have never used drugs or abused alcohol.

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Finally, while most public safety applicants respond to the all-familiar question about “Why do you want this job?” with the answer, “I want to help people,” a surprisingly increasing number brazenly state that they are looking for an “exciting” line of work where “they will never be bored.” And when asked pointedly about their initial interest in a career as a police officer or firefighter/paramedic, they openly say, “I loved watching *Emergency One* or *Law and Order* and *CSI* on TV.” Several popular movies like *Backdraft* or *Die Hard* and *L.A. Confidential* also make the list in proving inspiration in their ultimate career choice. Glaringly missing in many instances are responses pertaining to community service. Oh, it’s true that many public safety applicants pay lip service to the notion, but when asked for concrete examples of where these candidates have actually freely volunteered their time to help others who are less fortunate or in need, very few can provide us with specifics. The most we hear about are social service commitments in high school or college that were required as part of a course curriculum. In sum, our action-driven society given to video games is promoting professions that sound on the face to be exhilarating and full of thrills and excitement. Meanwhile, public service is often now an afterthought.

While these trends over the past 30 years are not all-inclusive, they do represent a major shift in the kinds of people who apply for public safety positions. While some of the changes are for the better, others are more questionable. Have you observed these changes as well? We invite your comments, criticism, or anything else you might want to add. We plan on publishing a newsletter for our public safety audience on a quarterly basis, and we would welcome your input on other topics of interest to you.

Future Topics

Promotional Assessments

Accountability

Body Art and Tattoos