

Mandatory Fitness Assessments for Law Enforcement:

The Advantages and Challenges of Implementation

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Abstract

Physical fitness is an important part of the law enforcement professions. Recently, law enforcement agencies have lowered standards to combat low recruitment rates. Nonetheless, having physically fit police officers is essential to public safety. A growing number of law enforcement agencies in the nation either do not have or have stopped implementing mandatory fitness assessments. This research will review the impact of physical fitness on the profession as it relates to public safety and the safety of an officer, legal and other considerations when implementing assessments, and what agencies can do to better support their officers. Mandatory fitness tests are recommended because if done correctly, the long-term benefits outweigh the risks.

Mandatory Fitness Assessments for Law Enforcement: The Advantages and Challenges of Implementation

In general, the law enforcement profession can be a physically demanding occupation. Like that of firefighters and military personnel, law enforcement officers are often expected to perform with elevated levels of physical fitness during their duties. While most day-to-day duties require little physical exertion, at any given moment a law enforcement officer must be ready and able to perform. They must be ready to chase down a suspect, drag a fellow officer or civilian to safety, or wrestle a combative individual.

Pillar Six of *The Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (2015) recognized the importance of Officer Wellness and Safety when it indicated “the wellness and safety of law enforcement officers is critical not only to themselves, their colleagues, and their agencies but also to public safety” (p. 61). The Task Force came to several conclusions. It recognized the law enforcement occupation as “risky” and physically demanding. It recognized that law enforcement officers often carry “physical, mental, and emotional injuries” (p. 61) because of performing various occupational tasks. The Task Force recognized there was often a correlation between the exposure of traumatic events while on the job and poor physical and mental health. The Task Force, therefore, recommended a “multi-faceted officer safety and wellness initiative” (p. 63). The initiative, though supported and encouraged by the federal government, would be in the end the responsibility of the individual agency (p. 65).

Robert G. Lockie and Joseph M. Dulla (2025) conducted a survey in 2023 to find which states established mandatory fitness assessments during various stages of a law enforcement officer's career. They surveyed the Peace Officer Standards and Training Commission of each state to help them identify standards. 49 of the 50 United States responded, and Lockie and Dulla

were able to determine that 88% of states did not require ongoing fitness standards for law enforcement officers post academy (Lockie & Dulla, 2025). It is important to note that while these commissions establish state standards, individual agencies can implement stricter fitness guidelines, but most do not. Again, the burden is placed on the individual agency to decide if their policies are sufficient regarding physical fitness standards.

In many agencies, *The Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (2015) has been widely accepted, and its recommendations and guidelines followed. Law Enforcement agencies nationwide have grasped many of the 21st Century Policing Pillars and implemented best practices as recommended by the report. It has been well established the importance of physical fitness in the law enforcement profession. Despite the acknowledgement of its importance, law enforcement agencies are stepping away from mandatory fitness assessments post academy, essentially eliminating the requirement of a law enforcement officer to maintain his or her elevated level of fitness. This research will look at the several advantages of mandatory fitness tests, as well as the legal considerations and implications present. This research will also offer options for those agencies looking to either again implement mandatory fitness testing, or at the very least, provide fitness programs to encourage and support their officers' physical well-being.

Countless studies show a correlation between mental and physical health among law enforcement officers. If one is lacking, the other is likely as well. Officers who are exposed to traumatic events continuously over time may suffer psychological effects particularly depression, anxiety, and/or post-traumatic stress. (Santre, 2024). Stressors on law enforcement officers can have devastating effects. Siriporn Santre (2024), expressed in his research that stress symptoms “may emerge as an enhancement in physical problems, such as an increase in occupational

injuries and a boost in diagnoses related to stress, such as high blood pressure or gastrointestinal ulcers.” Santre went further to state that some stressors could alter an officer’s behavior negatively causing the officer to react to situations more aggressive or violent than normal (Santre, 2024). Other concerns of course include the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

Unfortunately, law enforcement officers do not have the luxury of picking to which types of incidents they are exposed. They will experience an event that will affect them negatively regarding their mental health. Exposure is inevitable, but how they manage the stressors is vital. Research has been conducted and it has been proven across several platforms that physical fitness and exercise can reduce symptoms caused by mental health problems. For example, The Mayo Clinic (2023) submitted an article explaining that “physical activity can ease symptoms of depression or anxiety, and make you feel better.” Sharma et al. (2006) expressed in *Exercise for Mental Health* that physical activity can relieve stress, improve sleep, mood, cardiovascular health and endurance, increase energy and stamina, support weight loss, and reduce cholesterol (Sharma et al., 2006).

Law enforcement officers who regularly exercise and who are intentional about making healthy decisions will more likely stand up to the task when the job becomes physically demanding. Regular fitness training can improve cardiovascular health, endurance, and muscular strength. The United States Department of Health and Human Services (2018) stresses the need for physical fitness for overall health identifying that regular physical activity can reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, some common cancers, obesity, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes (HHS, 2018). This information is relevant for the general population, but even more valuable to the law enforcement officer whose profession places them among those who are at greatest risk for the above-mentioned health problems. It is also well known that being physically fit can reduce the

risk of injury and decrease recovery time. Strong and able bodies can sustain more impact and bounce back faster in case of injury. Officers who maintain their physical fitness last longer in the occupation and are less likely to face medical retirement and/or disability.

The health and wellness of a police officer is a public safety issue. Officers who are physically and mentally well are less likely to miss work and more likely to approach incidents with more professionalism and better judgement. Healthy officers make better public servants. Better public servants gain support from the community and help improve agency legitimacy. Agencies should play a role in ensuring public safety by implementing a continuation of physical fitness standards post academy.

It may seem simple to some, but developing mandatory fitness testing in law enforcement agencies has its legal considerations and challenges. There are several legal factors and/or commissions to consider including the following: The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Local Civil Service Commissions, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), Title I of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), and the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (UGESP) adopted by the EEOC.

EEOC is an organization that can enforce the federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against job applicants and employees based on various characteristics such as age, sex, race, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, etc. The EEOC has established standards and guidelines employers must follow during the hiring process and ongoing employment. *Employment Tests and Selection Procedures* (2007) outlines the legal considerations employers should be mindful of and discusses the several types of testing allowed during which phases of employment (EEOC, 2007).

One of the federal laws that EEOC enforces is Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII). Title VII prohibits any type of employment discrimination because of race, religion, sex, or national origin. Title VII is not opposed to testing so long as the test administered does not discriminate. Title VII prohibits “disparate treatment” and “disparate impact” (EEOC, 2007). Disparate treatment is when an applicant is treated differently through the process based on race, religion, sex, national origin etc. The example provided by the EEOC would be testing reading skills of African American applicants, but not that of Caucasian applicants (EEOC, 2007). Disparate impact is when employers use non-job-related, neutral tests resulting in the disproportionately exclusion of persons based on race, sex, religion, national origin etc. The example provided by the EEOC would be an employer conducting a non-job-related physical agility test, but the test disproportionately screens out women (EEOC, 2007). If the employer can show the test is job-related and necessary to performance of the job, and there is no other alternative to that test, the test will be allowed.

The EEOC enforces federal laws as it relates to Title I of the ADA which prohibits discrimination based on disabilities. ADA regulates when and how an employer may ask disability related questions during the hiring process. Employment tests cannot screen out individuals with disabilities, employers must administer tests in the “most effective manner” to accurately reflect skills and aptitude, and employers must provide “reasonable accommodations” during testing unless the accommodation would “impose undue hardship” (EEOC, 2007). If accommodation cannot be found, the employer must be able to explain why and show they attempted to do so in good faith. Like Title VII and ADA, is ADEA which prohibits discrimination based on age (40 and older).

The EEOC has adopted The Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (UGESP). A website managed by Biddle Consulting group provides a resource for Human Resources Departments. Biddle Group explains that UGESp provides a framework to ensure employers are operating and instituting testing and selection procedures that do not violate federal law or discriminate against potential or current employees based on sex, race, national origin, religion, age, disability, etc. To avoid discrimination lawsuits, law enforcement agencies should research and follow guidelines outlined by EEOC and federal law prior to creating and administering any mandatory fitness assessment post academy. In the case where law enforcement agencies are subject to local Civil Service Commissions, this governing body must also approve any implementation. Civil Service Commissions are in place to ensure that hiring processes, employment procedures, promotional guidelines, and disciplinary actions taken against employees are deemed legal and fair. Physical fitness assessments have not been outlawed by the EEOC or federal law, however, steps must be taken to prove they will not discriminate against any person.

Law enforcement agencies should also consider the potential impact on Workers' Compensation, Retention and Retirement, and how well their officers will accept the mandated fitness testing. Matt Dolan (2014) warns in *Physical Fitness Testing in Public Safety Agencies* that “agencies should be aware of the possibility that mandatory physical fitness testing may result in an increase in exercise-related injuries both during the testing itself as well as in the course of testing preparation.” Law enforcement agencies will have to weigh the risks of potential workers’ compensation claims due to testing versus higher risk of on-the-job injury due to lack of physical fitness among employees (Dolan, 2014).

While eventually, retention of officers may be greater, at the time of implementation, mandatory fitness testing may result in officers leaving the job. Some officers may not want to participate and seek opportunities elsewhere. Some may opt to go ahead with retirement. Law enforcement agencies must consider the impact of a pass or fail test. Another consideration could include providing a period for preparation and retest should an officer fail. Some agencies may choose to survey their officers to see how they feel about mandatory testing. Some agencies may choose a “carrot” versus “stick” approach offering incentives with successful completion or discipline with failure. Administrators should remember, however, even in case of pushback, the fitness of the officers they employ to effectively complete their job tasks is a matter of public safety. The impact of the decision to mandate fitness testing must be weighed heavily and the risk must be worth the reward.

If choosing against mandatory fitness assessments, then what can law enforcement agencies do to better support their officers’ physical wellness? Ignoring the issue is not an option as the physical and mental well-being of law enforcement officers has been proven repeatedly to be a public safety issue. The first recommendation is to ask what officers want. Police1 (2024) conducted a survey. There were approximately 2,833 law enforcement officers who participated. 76% of respondents said their biggest obstacle when it came to working out was “lack of time” (Police1, 2024). The following are some responses provided by officers who remained anonymous:

“For patrol officers, we need time to work out on duty. I work out before work, but this turns my day into a 16-hour day without overtime. The department needs to give patrol officers time to work out because it helps with their stress.”

“Physical fitness stipend to augment gym membership. We have a gym, but it’s too small.”

“Clearly establish time and secure location to work out on duty. We currently contract with a public gym that is open to the public and on multiple occasions I have encountered people there I have interacted with as an officer. Our workout time is also contingent upon staffing and call volume, so it is not that uncommon for that time to get pulled.”

Several contributors to Police1 also investigated the data supplied by *What Cops Want* (2024) and provided options for agencies on how to support the physical fitness of their officers (Nice et al., 2024). In *Blueprint for police fitness: Pathways to peak performance* (2024), contributors recommend agencies provide a fitness facility for officers and allow on duty workouts. They recommend offering equipment and training programs specific to their occupation. They recommend either hiring a Tactical Strength and Conditioning Specialist and/or ensuring agency training staff acquire this type of certification (Nice et al. 2024). As with most training programs, progress should be tracked, and the program should be evaluated to determine its effectiveness. The program can be implemented on a voluntary basis. In general, there are a host of resources available specifically for law enforcement officers they just may not know about. While many agencies have been doing well to offer mental health resources, adding quality resources for physical fitness will only boost both areas of officer well-being.

In conclusion, physical fitness (and mental wellness) of officers does not only affect the individual officer. The wellness of an officer’s physical and mental state also affects their coworkers and the public. Physically fit officers can manage the day-to-day tasks of the job, as well as those volatile incidents when physical exertion may be at its maximum. Healthy officers, in both body and mind, are better able to serve the communities they work in. They are also

better able to serve their family and friends. To best serve the community, law enforcement agencies nationwide should give more attention to how well their agency supports the physical fitness of their officers. Many states and agencies do not require mandatory fitness testing; however, these assessments are the best way to ensure law enforcement officers are maintaining their elevated level of fitness. There are several legal considerations and challenges to consider, however, if the agency does the research and follows the guidelines specifically identified, they will find the reward is worth the risk. With mandatory fitness testing, officers will be required to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Agencies will be able to ensure they have provided their officers with every opportunity to better serve their communities. The public's perception of law enforcement can be greatly steered in the right direction just based on the presence of physically fit, healthy appearing officers. The better these officers can serve their communities, the further community members will legitimize the authority of its local law enforcement agency, creating more trust between the two. Law enforcement agencies nationwide should implement stricter fitness standards in the name of public safety. In time, the benefits will outweigh cost, and agencies will consist of better and happier officers willing to serve their communities at the best of their abilities.

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