

The Need for Fitness Standards in Law Enforcement: An Analysis of Sheriff's Offices, Municipalities and University Agencies across Florida.

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Abstract

The author introduces the need for fitness standards in law enforcement and identifies the most commonly used forms of testing in Florida. A survey is conducted across the state of Florida totaling 31 agencies; of which, included are sheriff's offices, municipalities and university agencies. The results are analyzed and explained in an attempt to give a snap shot of which agencies across Florida have fitness standards for hiring and maintaining employment. Discussed are the different results and comparisons between universities, municipalities and sheriff's offices. The author points out the low percentage of agencies that have a fitness standard for maintaining employment and recommends changes that need to be made across the state.

Introduction (Literature Review)

It should not be surprising that physical fitness and exercise improve long-term health. Studies have shown that sedentary people have twice the risk of coronary artery disease than active people as well as a higher risk of stroke, colon cancer and back injuries. Regular physical activity helps to prevent coronary heart disease and assists with weight control. Weight training and strength exercises build muscles and endurance and enhance flexibility, thus protecting the body from injury and disability. Being physically fit translates into fewer sick days, disabilities, and injuries, thereby reducing healthcare costs. (Quigley, 2008)

The most recent data from validation studies, conducted since 1992, include test results for more than 4,000 officers. The data indicate that fitness levels for younger male officers are average or above average for all areas compared to the general population. One reason may be that the general population (especially adolescents and young adults) as a whole is less fit due to decreased physical activity. As a consequence, younger officers who have recently undergone basic academy training score at higher levels on fitness tests. Older officers tend to score at or below average. Special units such as SWAT teams had the highest fitness levels.

These data suggest two things. First, even younger officers are at best only as fit as their civilian contemporaries. Second, they compare even less favorably the longer they are on the force. (Hoffman & Collingwood, 2005)

Part of an officer's effectiveness within the community is based on the image the officer presents. The public judges officers by their physical appearance and their lifestyle, both of which are related to fitness. The judgment affects how well "police presence" can have a deterrent effect.

A national organization has analyzed case studies of officers who were severely beaten during attempted arrests. Virtually every one of the assailants said they “wanted to hurt the officer” because it was readily apparent that the officers lacked the physical wherewithal to defend themselves. This “offended” the assailants. Fitness as a means of improving an officer’s image also reflects the recent trend toward improving an officer’s image also reflects the recent trend toward improving the professionalism of law enforcement officials. Agencies have focused on areas such as officer’s ethics, cognitive functioning, and interpersonal and social skills; they should also include fitness in their initiatives.

There has always been general consensus that law enforcement officers require some level of physical fitness. However, a disturbing opinion is being expressed that modern-day law enforcement requires little physical effort and, as a consequence, fitness standards or programs are not necessary. For example, some officers argue that good interpersonal and verbal skills can diffuse many potential use-of-force situations. Although that may be true at a general level, the critical incident reports we reviewed suggest otherwise. In turn, the data we have amassed from numerous job tasks analyses clearly show that the job entails both frequent and critical physical demands. (Hoffman & Collingwood, 2005)

The need for physical fitness standards, both for hiring and to maintain employment in law enforcement has been well documented over the years; yet several agencies still have not integrated a standard. The two standards most commonly used in the state of Florida are the Physical Abilities Test (PAT) and standards set forth by the Cooper Fitness Institute.

The PAT is designed to be conducted outdoors on a flat grassy surface or on a standard quarter-mile track where firm footing is guaranteed. It is necessary to have a grassy surface with grass cut no higher than 4 inches. There are several options in which the course can be constructed properly, to comply with limited space. The test requires an absolute minimum of equipment and employs easily accessible items. Items needed to construct the PAT are listed according to tasks.

The PAT was designed to assess physical attributes which reflect core enabling knowledge, skills and abilities and essential tasks common for law enforcement, corrections and correctional probation officers. The physical abilities test is to be conducted in a continuous flow manner that is time-dependent in order to determine the participant's level of physical condition and aerobic capacity. The PAT measures specific physical abilities through a series of tasks which are listed as follows:

1. exiting vehicle/open trunk
2. 220 yard run
3. obstacle course
4. dummy drag
5. obstacle course (repeat)
6. 220 yard run (repeat)
7. dry fire weapon
8. place items in trunk/enter vehicle (FDLE,1997).

The tests that the Cooper Institute uses are the following:

- 1.5 mile run
- Sit and reach
- 1 Minute sit up
- 1 Minute full body push up for men and modified push up for women
- Body fat
- 1RM bench press
- 1RM leg press

The purpose of this study is to determine if Florida law enforcement agencies are integrating fitness standards for hiring and maintaining employment; the reasons why or why not, and how do university law enforcement agencies compare to contiguous county agencies and municipalities.

Methods

This study was conducted by surveying agencies across the state of Florida. The agencies I contacted were the eleven state university police departments, the eleven contiguous sheriff's offices from the counties where the universities are located and a municipality within each of those same eleven counties. This makes a total of 31 agencies contacted (11 university's, 10 counties & 10 municipalities). It should be noted that the Florida State University and the Florida Agricultural Mechanical University are both located in Leon County.

The data was collected through a five question survey, I created using Survey Monkey.com. The survey asked each agency if they had a physical fitness requirement for hiring and for maintaining employment. If so, what method was used and if not, what were some of the reasons.

A strength of this survey is that it is short and easy to complete. Another factor to consider as a strength was the actions taken preceding the survey that aided greatly in the high response rate. Each agency that was going to be surveyed was telephoned before the survey was sent. The survey was explained in order to get buy in; this also let the person know the e-mail they were going to receive was not spam. A weakness of this survey was the lack of detail within the questions asked and only a fraction of law enforcement agencies across Florida were surveyed. The survey should have been clearer on what defines a fitness standard opposed to a physical examination by a physician and then delineate between the two.

Results

31 agencies were contacted across the state of Florida. 29 agencies responded, producing a 94 percent return rate. Of the 31 agencies, all 11 state university police departments responded. The majority of the university agencies do have a fitness standard for hiring, however most don't have a standard for maintaining employment. The same could be said for the sheriff's offices and municipalities. The most common form of testing for all agencies was the PAT test. The two agencies that did not respond are both municipalities.

Statement/Question Review

Question One: Does your agency have a physical fitness requirement in the hiring process for law enforcement officers? 79.3 percent of respondents answered yes; 20.7 percent answered no; no one skipped the question.

Question Two: Does your agency have a physical fitness requirement in order for law enforcement officers to maintain employment? 27.6 percent of respondents answered yes; 72.4 percent answered no; no one skipped the question.

Question Three: If yes to question #1 or #2, which of the following does your agency use? The choices were: Physical Abilities Test, Cooper Fitness Standard, or Other. 55.2 percent of respondents answered the Physical Abilities Test; 3.4 percent answered Cooper Fitness Standard; 20.7 percent answered "Other" and 20.7 percent had no standard.

Question Four: If no to #1 or #2, are there reasons why your agency does not have a physical fitness requirement? 15 respondents answered this question and 14 skipped.

Question Five: What agency do you currently work for? 29 respondents answered this question and no one skipped.

When reviewing these results, immediately what stood out was the high amount of agencies that have a fitness standard for hiring. This high rate caused me to look closer at the numbers and I discovered this high rate was probably skewed because question one and three were misinterpreted. It appears as though at least six agencies responded no to both questions one and two so following logic, there should be six agencies that skipped question number three which states: "If yes to question 1 or 2, which of the following does your agency use?" the answers offered are the PAT test, Cooper Fitness standards or "Other". Questions one and two refer to if the agency has a fitness standard for hiring or maintaining employment. Several agencies marked "yes" for having a fitness standard for hiring, however most marked "no" for having a standard for maintaining employment. I discovered that six of the agencies that responded yes to having a hiring standard also marked "Other" for question number three. It appears as

though some of the respondents interpreted “fitness standard” as the FDLE mandated physical, performed by a physician. This is reflected in some of the answers for number four where the respondent answered yes to number one, yet still answered number four and states he or she’s agency only does what the state requires.

Copies of the survey instrument along with miscellaneous data and charts are included at the end of this report as Appendix A, B and C.

Discussion

To start, I will say that I was impressed with the professionalism all the agencies I reached out to displayed. The response rate for this survey was outstanding thanks to the cooperation of the agencies surveyed. I found Survey Monkey was easy to use and a great way to capture information. I also have a new found respect for people that conduct research for a living. It’s a tedious task at times, but nonetheless very important and necessary.

Leading into this research, I was really interested to see how university agencies stacked up against the municipalities and sheriff’s offices. Of the agencies surveyed; 73 percent of the universities have a fitness standard for hiring, while 60 percent of municipalities have a standard and 100 percent of the sheriff’s offices do. Again these numbers are a little skewed due to misinterpretations, however even with that being factored in; I was pleasantly surprised that most agencies surveyed, did indeed have a fitness standard. I also was pleased to see the university agencies measured up nicely when compared to the other agencies.

The question I feel that is most important within my survey is if agencies have a fitness standard in place to maintain employment. We all know that the real issue we face is not the newly hired officer right out of the academy; it’s what they end up as fifteen years later. With the exception of a few, when there is no standard in place to maintain employment, officer’s fitness levels worsen significantly over the course of their careers.

Of the agencies surveyed; only 18 percent of universities have a fitness standard in place to maintain employment, and only 30 percent of municipalities and sheriff’s offices have a standard. I knew before I surveyed that the percentages would probably be low so these results are not surprising, yet I still find myself disappointed. How do we allow this to happen in a profession that demands physical fitness?

Each year officers are required to show proficiency in high liability areas such as firearms, defensive tactics and driving. I would argue that one’s fitness level falls right in with other high liability areas, yet there is no mandatory annual standard. Any encounter with any person while on duty can end up physical. Often times being in shape can be the difference between life or death. Why not make it a priority?

Recommendations

My recommendation would be to start a mandatory physical fitness requirement, both for hiring and maintaining employment as a sworn law enforcement/correctional officer across the state of Florida. For hiring it could be effective immediately and for officers already employed the standard could be phased in over a two year period. The standard used would be the PAT test; with a maximum time allotted being 6 minutes and 4 seconds. If an agency wanted to set a lower/higher time as a standard, this would be acceptable as long as they could justify it with a job task analysis.

I feel these recommendations would prove to show a dramatic decrease in health related absences, workers compensation claims, on duty injuries and even deaths involving a physical struggle. It's time law enforcement officials wake up and realize this topic is of the utmost importance in our profession and should be treated as such.

Lieutenant Jason Trumbower has been with the FSUPD for over 12 years where he served as a bike officer and a field training officer before being promoted to Sergeant. He was later promoted to Lieutenant where he now supervises Crime Prevention, Internal Affairs, Hiring & Recruiting and the School Resource Officer Program. He is certified through the Cooper Fitness Institute and also Titus Fitness as an instructor in their Protectors Program.

References

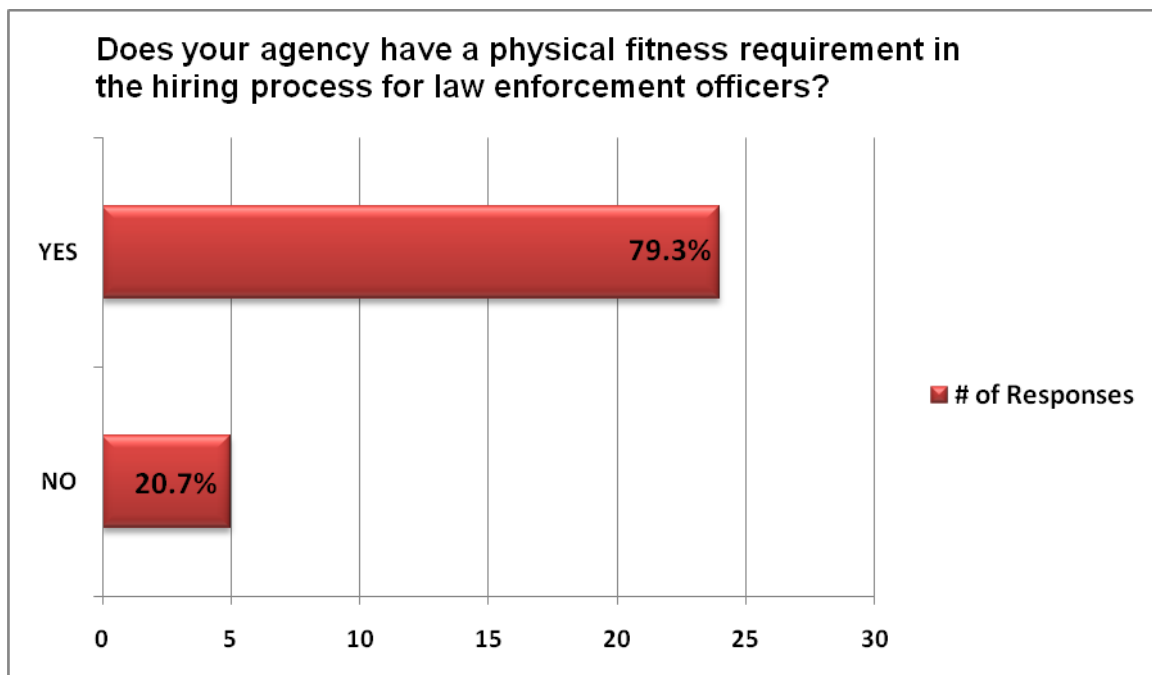
Florida Department of Law Enforcement (1997). Physical Agility Test.
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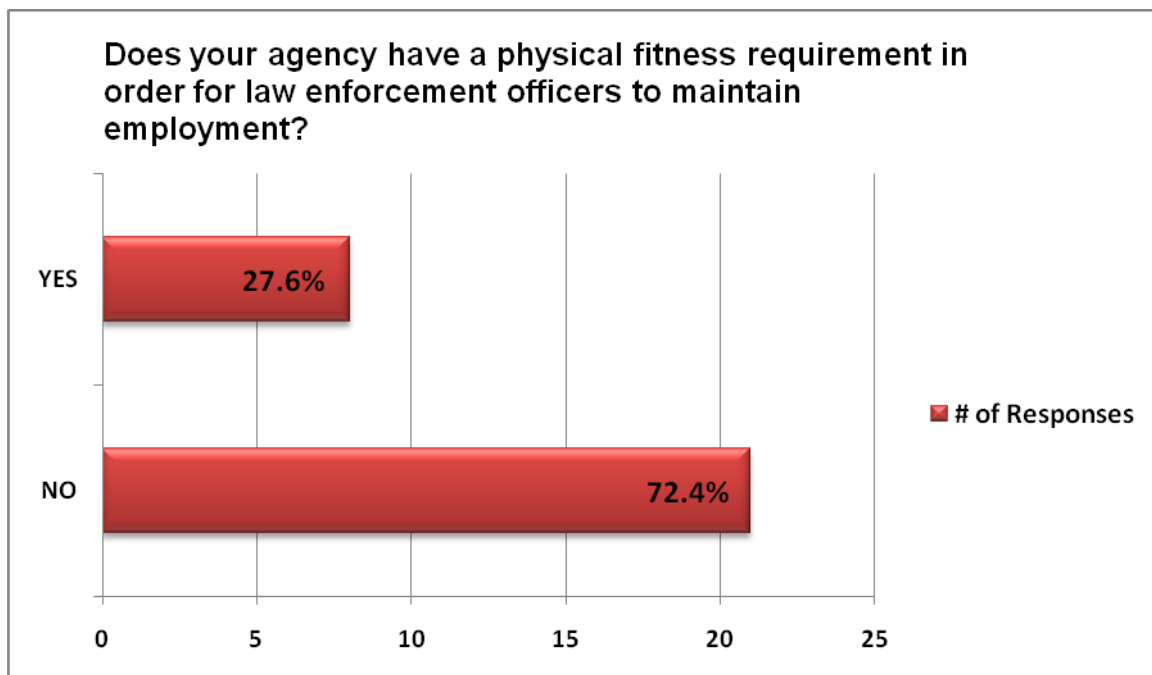
Quigley, A. (2008, June). Fit for duty? *The Police Chief*, 75(6), 62-64.

Appendix A

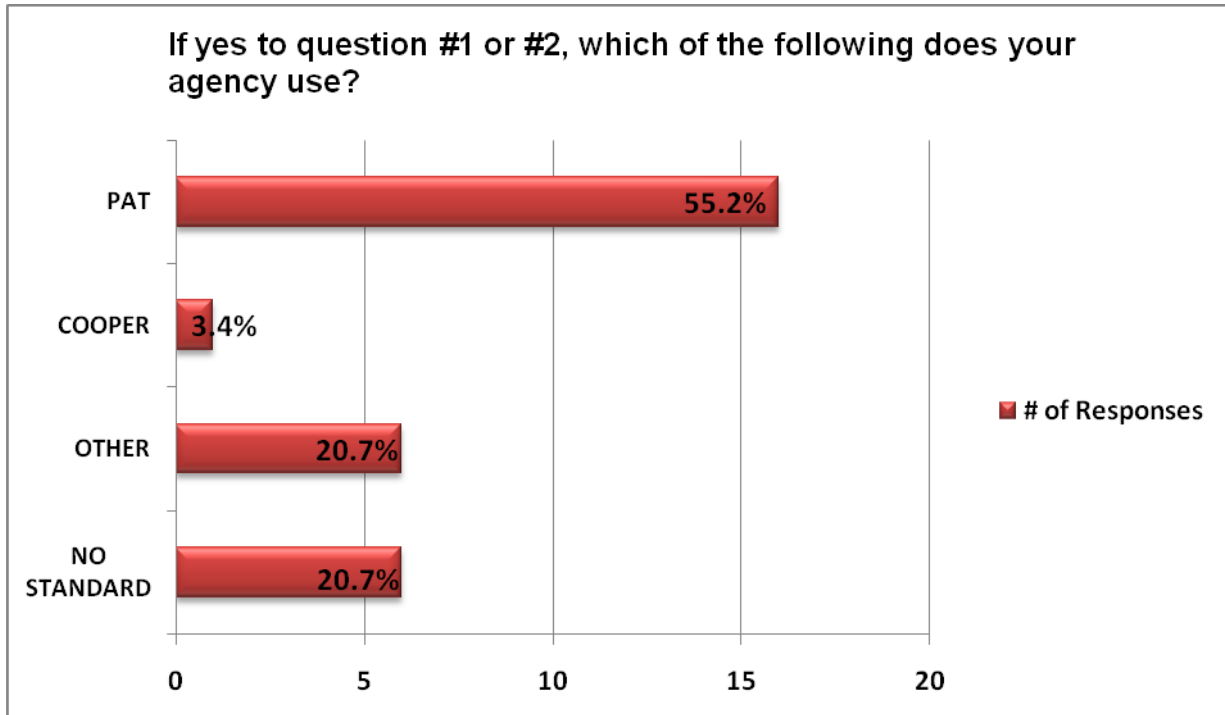
Question 1



Question 2

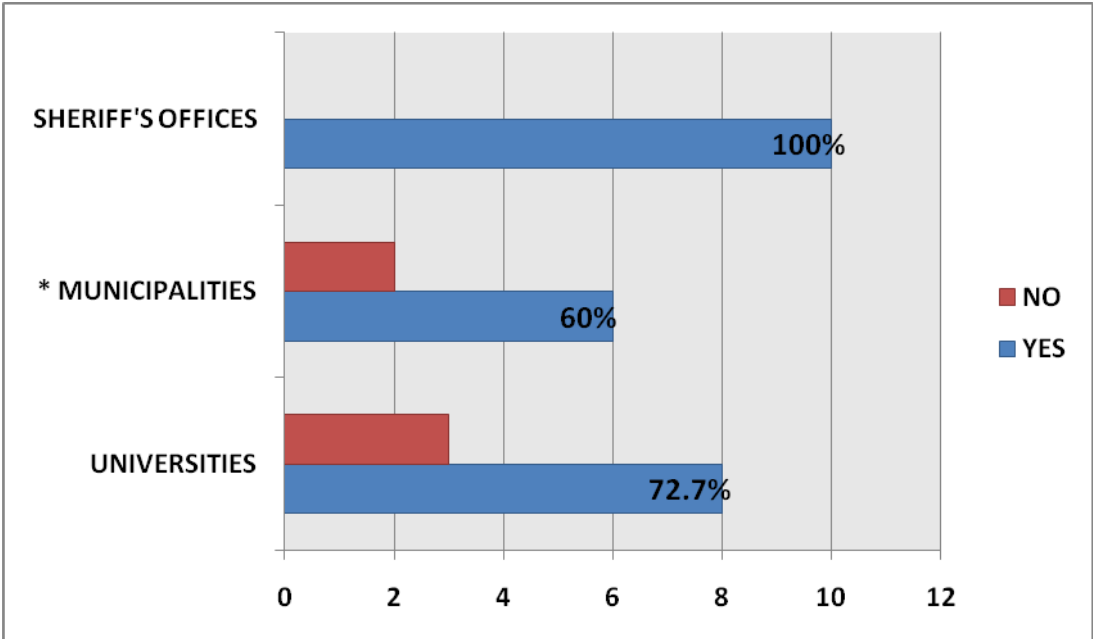


Question 3



Appendix B

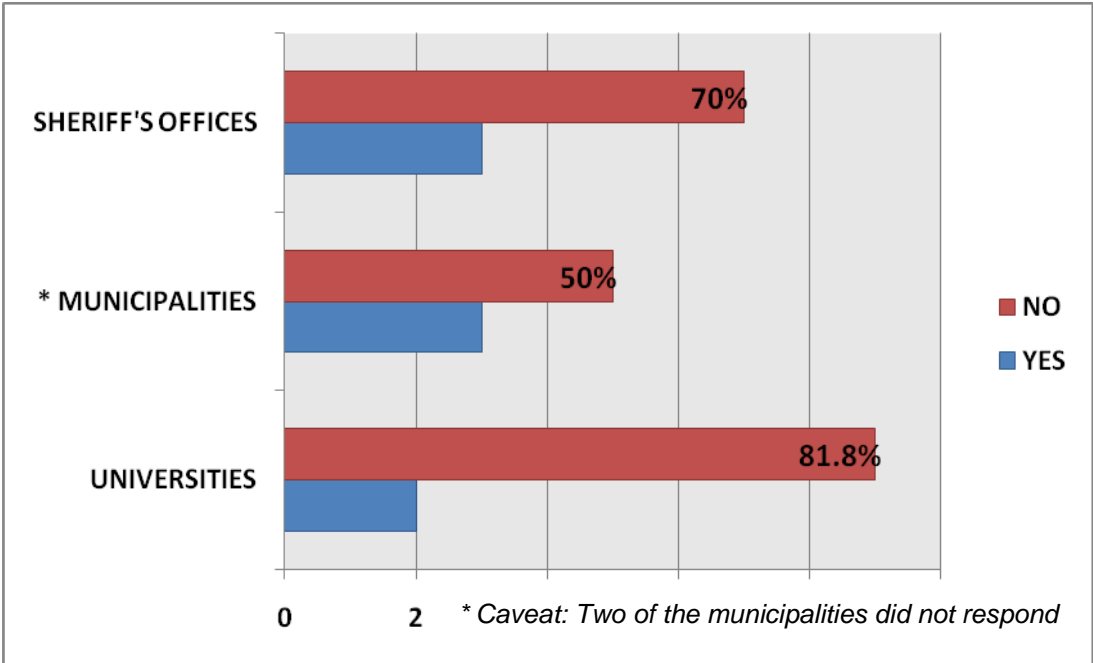
HIRING



*Caveat: Two of the municipalities did not respond

MAINTAINING

EMPLOYMENT



* Caveat: Two of the municipalities did not respond

Appendix C

Good Morning Everyone,

My name is Jason Trumbower and I am a Lieutenant with the Florida State University Police Department in Tallahassee, Florida. I am currently doing a research paper for a Senior Leadership Class with FDLE. Below is a link to a survey I'm conducting as part of my research. I would really appreciate it if you took the time to complete it. The survey is 5 questions and should only take a couple minutes to complete.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NQ8DD3V>

Again, your cooperation is greatly appreciated. If I can assist you during this process or if you have any questions please let me know. My contact information is listed below.

Thanks,

Lt. Jason Trumbower