

Model Policy for Screening Polygraph Examinations in Public Safety Employment

¹Updated March 15, 2025

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This Model Policy is provided to assist polygraph examiners and local agencies or jurisdictions responsible for policy development of examiners engaging in screening polygraph testing of public safety personnel.
- 1.2. In the event of conflict between law or local regulations and this Model Policy, law and local regulations should prevail. This Model Policy should be considered non-binding and not enforceable by the APA or any local jurisdiction.

2. Evidence-Based Approach

- 2.1. This Model Policy is intended to increase consistency and reliability among field polygraph examiners through standardized field practices.
- 2.2. This Model Policy emphasizes an evidence-based approach, relying on data from existing research pertaining to screening and diagnostic polygraph testing, risk assessment, and risk management principles.

3. Program Goals: Decision Support and Incremental Validity

- 3.1. Psychophysiological Detection of Deception (PDD), or polygraph testing, should be regarded as a decision-support tool intended to add incremental validity to risk assessment and risk management efforts surrounding the evaluation, selection and retention of public safety applicants and employees.
- 3.2. Polygraph testing cannot replace the need for a thorough background investigation for public safety applicants but should be thought of as part of a comprehensive pre-employment background investigation. Polygraph testing is best used to identify information that cannot be found by traditional investigative techniques and/or to clarify suspicious information or accusations found during field interviews.
- 3.3. Polygraph test results should be used with consideration for known polygraph test accuracy effect sizes and the probabilistic strength of conclusory classifications of deception or truth-telling. Personnel and administrative decisions, such as the selection or rejection of public safety employees, should always remain the domain of personnel and administrative professionals.
- 3.4. Operational objectives of Public Safety Screening polygraph testing include:
 - a. Increasing disclosure of additional information that will be of interest to risk adjudicators and hiring professionals in law enforcement and public service.
 - b. Deterring unsuitable applicants or existing personnel from joining and/or remaining in the applicant pool, by increasing the likelihood that past transgressions and activities will become known to authorities.

¹Formerly known as Model Policy for Law Enforcement/Public-Service Pre-Employment Polygraph Screening Examinations

- c. *Detecting* individuals who attempt to withhold information that would be of interest to risk adjudicators and personnel administrators and other leadership professionals.

4. Screening Tests

- 4.1. According to the APA Standards of Practice, screening tests are conducted in the absence of a known incident, known allegation, or any particular reason to suspect someone's involvement in a particular issue. Polygraph testing done as a part of pre-employment and/or continued employment, in the absence of any known allegation or incident, are defined as screening tests. This contrasts with an investigative polygraph that targets a single known event or known allegation.
- 4.2. Pre-employment polygraph screening exams for public safety agencies normally focus on identifying undesirable behaviors that exceed the tolerance of the agency, or those that would tend to be predictive of future negative behaviors. However, the use of this Model Policy is encouraged and useful for post-employment screening to identify previously unknown problem behaviors among employees in trusted positions at the agency.
 - a. *There can be a temptation to use polygraph testing to uncover every issue that may possibly be considered important to the agency in the employment process. This logic must be tempered by recognizing the limits of human memory as well as the constraints of valid polygraph testing: Polygraph accuracy declines as the number and breadth of test questions increase. No tool, including the polygraph, can be effective in identifying every past indiscretion that may have occurred in an individual's lifetime.*
 - b. *Optimal polygraph test accuracy may be best achieved using validated test formats covering a single issue for which truth and deception could not be mixed in the test format. Screening testing involves searching for possible unknown problems, in the absence of any known allegation or incident, where there are multiple behavioral issues of concern. There are, however, known problems associated with serial single-issue testing due to multiplicity of errors. Therefore, screening may utilize test formats with multiple issues for efficiency during the testing process. Policy makers and polygraph examiners must consider the benefits and drawbacks arising from either approach with single or multiple-issue test formats.*

5. Compliance

- 5.1. Polygraph policy makers and polygraph examiners should seek legal advice and adhere to all requirements of any law that may affect the hiring process or employee rights. In the United States these laws may include the Employee Polygraph Protection Act (EPPA), Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and others. In other locations, legal advice should be obtained regarding the impact of existing local legislation.

- 5.2. Unless prohibited by law, regulation, or agency policy, all polygraph examiners should conduct screening polygraph testing of law enforcement and other public service applicants that complies with the APA's Standards Practices.
- 5.3. Except as provided by law, polygraph test information and results should be kept confidential within the employment process.

6. Equipment

- 6.1. Examiners should use equipment that complies with the APA Standard for Polygraph Instrumentation.

7. Quality Assurance and Recording

- 7.1. Polygraph programs and examiners should participate in a quality assurance program review consistent with the APA Model Policy for Quality Assurance.

8. Test Question Construction

- 8.1. Investigation targets for public safety screening polygraphs should be selected based upon the written agency hiring policies.
- 8.2. Test question language, and the number of test questions, should be consistent with the requirements of the polygraph test format that is selected for use by the examiner.
- 8.3. Polygraph relevant questions should be limited to the least number of test issues possible and restricted to areas that are:
 - i. Based on agency hiring policies and are actuarially predictive of success in law enforcement or public service job performance.
 - ii. Descriptive of past behaviors (not thoughts, inclinations, intentions, or states of mind).
 - iii. Sufficiently recent to assure accurate recollection by the applicant.
 - iv. Sufficiently precise in definition as to avoid confusion in the mind of the applicant; and,
 - v. Not adequately, or better addressed, by another investigative method already employed as part of the screening process.
- 8.4. Examples of investigation targets include:
 - i. The subject's history of involvement in unknown or unreported criminal activities, including contact with income derived from, or involvement with, organized crime activities, or criminal organizations.
 - ii. The subject's history of involvement with banned substances and illegal drugs, including manufacturing, distributing, smuggling or transporting, money laundering, and/or recently using banned or illegal substances.

- iii. The subject's history of involvement in sexual contact with minors, including child sexual exploitation materials.
- iv. The subject's history of involvement in unknown acts of violence, including overt behaviors of intolerance towards people of differing racial or ethnic backgrounds.

8.5. Comparison questions should be formulated and introduced in a manner that is consistent with published information, training, and evidence-based practices.

9. Pretest Interview

9.1. The examination should start with a pre-test interview that complies with the APA Standards of Practice, including the following:

- a. Verification of the identity of the examinee.
- b. An informed written consent to administer the examination.
- c. A semi-structured interview covering suitability for testing and the relevant topics for the examination.
- d. A comprehensive review of all test questions to ensure the applicant's satisfactory understanding of each test question. All behavioral target issues should be supported by an operational definition to standardize their scope of meaning. Examiners may use visual aids or "Mind Maps" to anchor discussion topics and question wording.

10. Questionnaire

10.1. A questionnaire may be provided to the individual for completion prior to the polygraph testing procedure. The questionnaire should cover the individual's entirely relevant past activities, including his or her work experiences.

10.2. The examiner should review the questionnaire with the individual for clarification of any admissions, or identifying any additional information since the form was completed.

11. Testing Phase

11.1. The administration of the polygraph test should conform to the APA Standards of Practice for test administration, including the selection of validated test formats and the use of an acquaintance test.

12. Test Evaluation

12.1. A polygraph examiner should not render an opinion concerning the veracity of an examinee until after all test data for the session has been completed and enough suitable data collected for analysis has been analyzed.

12.2. The examiner should use a numerical scoring method for which they have been trained and that is appropriate for the type of test administered. The examiner should consider the use of computer measurement tools and scoring algorithms to aid examiner decision making.

- 12.3. When an examiner has utilized a single-issue screening test format, the examiner may make an opinion for truth or deception based on that issue. Examiners who employ a serial single-issue screening testing approach for multiple behavioral target issues should do so with consideration for known cumulative error effects.
- 12.4. When an examiner has utilized a multiple issue test format and has collected sufficient data, the examiner may make an opinion as to truth or deception to the test in total and may describe in verbal communication and written documentation which question, or questions, have produced significant reactions. Where there is a need to identify the issue or issues to which a subject is responding, the examiner may conduct additional single-issue tests formats to attempt to identify which issue(s) is the cause of the response.
- 12.5. If the scores from the data meet the threshold supporting the examinee's truthfulness, the examiner should render an opinion of No Significant Reactions/Responses (NSR) to the test.
- 12.6. If the scores from the data meet the threshold suggesting the examinee was untruthful, the examiner should render an opinion that there was Significant Reactions/Responses (SR) to the test.
- 12.7. If sufficient criteria to render an opinion do not exist, the examiner should report the exam as No Opinion (NO) or Inconclusive (INC).
- 12.8. Examiners may render a No Opinion outcome when the test of proportions suggests that the collected physiology was manipulated.

13. Post-Test Review

- 13.1. The individual should be informed of the test results and given an opportunity to provide any additional information or explanation whenever there are Significant Reactions (SR) observed to any of the relevant test questions.
- 13.2. Any admissions by the individual of activity that falls within the purview of legitimate areas of concern for the hiring agency should be noted and reported for consideration.

14. Records Retention

- 14.1. All test data (including audio or audio/video and digital recordings of physiological activity) and documentation for the examination should be maintained for a period of at least three years, or as required by law. If criminal admissions are made to mandate a report to law enforcement, all documentation should be retained according to retention schedules for that agency.

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