

# What It Means to Public Safety

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The relationship between professional psychology and law enforcement began nearly 100 years ago when Lewis Terman, PhD, a leading expert in intelligence testing, was commissioned in 1916 to assess the suitability of police applicants to the San Jose, California, Police Department. But it took a half century for the relationship to blossom. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967) called for the use of psychological tests "for identifying and measuring the personal characteristics that contribute to good police work."<sup>1</sup> In 1968, the Los Angeles, California, Police Department hired Martin Reiser, EdD, ABPP, as the first full-time police psychologist at a major law enforcement agency. A few years later, the San Jose Police Department hired Michael Roberts, PhD, ABPP, as the nation's second full-time police psychologist, paving the way for the acceptance of police psychology as a standard function within law enforcement agencies.

Behind the names of both of these pioneering psychologists are four letters—ABPP—that may be unfamiliar to many outside of professional psychology. Among psychologists, however, the letters signify board certification by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). For more than 60 years, the ABPP has provided board certification through credential review and competency-based examination processes for psychologists. As such, the letters ABPP document attainment of the highest level of

recognition of competence within a psychological specialty.

Competency and the assessment of it have been the focus of the ABPP since it was established in 1947 through the sponsorship of the American Psychological Association (APA). Initially, the ABPP offered board certification in clinical and counseling psychology. Today, with the emergence of new specialties, there are a total of 14 ABPP affiliated specialties.

As the specialty of police psychology has grown in terms of practice, research, and scientific knowledge, an initiative was organized to achieve formal professional recognition of the specialty. Members of the IACP Police Psychological Services Section collaborated with members of two other national professional police psychology organizations<sup>2</sup> to define the practice of police and public safety psychology, identify the scientific knowledge base, and designate basic benchmarks of competence. This effort initially resulted in the recognition of police psychology by the APA Committee on Recognition of Specialties and Proficiencies in Psychology in 2008. Subsequently, following an extensive period of self-study and public comment, the ABPP Board of Trustees voted unanimously in 2010 to accept the American Board of Police and Public Safety Psychology's (ABPPSP's) application to be its 14th specialty board. The significance of this development for police agencies, law enforcement personnel, police psychologists, and the public is the subject of this article.

## Licensure versus Board Certification

The fundamental difference between licensure and board certification relates to the differences between general knowledge and training in psychology, specific knowledge of a specialty, and competence in the practice of that specialty.

As professional psychology grew during the past century, efforts to regulate the profession and provide for consumer protection led to the establishment of licensure. Although some jurisdictions make a licensure distinction between health service providers and those who practice in non-health service settings, in most jurisdictions, licensure as a psychologist is generic, not specialty specific. As such, licensure provides basic assurance that a psychologist is sufficiently educated and knowledgeable to practice psychology in general. However, the review and examination process required for licensure as a psychologist typically is based on the assessment of general psychological knowledge as opposed to specific knowledge and competency in any specialty practice area.

A specialty is a defined area of psychological practice that requires advanced scientific and theoretical knowledge germane to the specialty, as well as competence in advanced professional applications of this knowledge to problems and populations in particular settings. As specialties emerge in psychology, professionals define the knowledge and skills required for specialized practice, and consumers seek to be better able to identify competent psychologists within specialty areas.<sup>3</sup>

Competence is a core expectation within a profession. Many professions—among them medicine, law, and psychology—have established methods to evaluate and recognize competence. Similarly, the APA ethics code<sup>4</sup> addresses consumer protection and states that one should practice within one's area of *competence*. Some competencies (i.e., *foundational* competencies) may be common to all specialties (e.g., professionalism and ethical and legal standards) while others (that are *functional* competencies) are those that relate to the practice of a specific specialty and require specific knowledge and experience. In this regard, it also is important to differentiate between general experience and competence; consider that a professional may be generally well-experienced but not necessarily knowledgeable or competent in the practice of a specialty.

Board certification of police psychologists is an outgrowth of this attention to competence and consumer protection. It serves as one method for addressing competency to provide services in a specialty area. As a way of serving the public and the profession, one of the ABPP's primary purposes is certifying specialists through competency-based examinations.

## The American Board of Police and Public Safety Psychology

In 2007, the IACP Police Psychological Services Section joined with the two other national organizations representing police psychology<sup>5</sup> to define the full range of psychological services provided within the specialty.<sup>6</sup> These 57 activities are organized under four areas or domains of practice, consisting of assessment (such as preemployment psychological screening and fitness-for-duty evaluations); intervention (including individual counseling and posttraumatic debriefing); operational support (ranging from hostage/crisis negotiation to criminal profiling); and organizational consulting (for example, management development and climate studies).

In 2008, under the umbrella of the Council of Organizations in Police Psychology, the three national police psychology organizations began a collaborative effort to establish a specialty board affiliated with the ABPP, and in 2010 the ABPPSP received the first invitation in a decade to become an ABPP specialty board.

To date, more than 160 police psychologists have applied to become ABPPSP board-certified specialists in police and public safety psychology. The ABPP requires that every applicant for board certification through ABPPSP demonstrate competence in the specialty through four successive methods, each of which must be successfully completed before advancing to the next.

1. A review of generic credentials to ensure that the applicant meets strict eligibility requirements for doctoral education, predoctoral training and supervision, and licensure
2. A review of specialty (i.e., police and public safety psychology) credentials, including postdoctoral training in police and public safety psychology, supervision and experience in police and public safety psychology, continuing education in police and public safety psychology, and no less than 3,000 hours of substantive police and public safety–related experience over no fewer than two years
3. The submission of a practice sample consisting of police and public safety psychology work samples and an intensive self-study for review and evaluation by a panel of three specialty board peers
4. A three-stage, three-hour oral examination by a panel of board-certified specialists

These four evaluation methods reflect the four modes of assessment recognized by the APA Task Force on the Assessment of Competence in Professional Psychology as a model of competency evaluation:

1. Measures of knowledge
2. Measures of professional decision making
3. Measures of practice performance, including professional attributes
4. Integrated assessment of practice-based skills and tasks<sup>7</sup>

When applying this model to the ABPP evaluation procedures, the task force writes: “The practice sample and oral examination used by the ABPP specialty boards to assess competence in a given specialty area may reflect higher fidelity approaches than those used elsewhere in the profession. In other words, these assessment strategies may tap competence in a manner that reflects actual practice.”<sup>8</sup>

## Benefits of Board Certification in Police and Public Safety

Although board certification benefits psychologists in all specialties, it is especially vital for specialists engaged in work that exposes them, personally or vicariously, to a high incidence of trauma. Known as “practice in *extremis*,” these specialties (for example, police psychology and military psychology) require a high level of competence, and they also involve a heightened potential for erosion of competence through the same kinds of emotional and psychological mechanisms that affect police officers (for example, posttraumatic reactions, vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue, burnout, and empathy failure).<sup>9</sup>

For police agencies and their personnel, as well as for the public, a key benefit of ABPP board certification of police psychologists is the identification of specialists who have demonstrated competence through an arduous examination by a board of their peers, as measured against established specialty standards and benchmarks.

The process of the ABPP board certification reflects in many ways the self-assessment and on-site assessment procedures required for national accreditation of a law enforcement agency through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). The goals of the ABPPSP board certification also closely correspond with those of CALEA accreditation; namely, strengthening practitioner capabilities; formalizing essential procedures; establishing fair, ethical, and nondiscriminatory practices; improving service delivery; improving collaboration and cooperation among practitioners; and increasing user confidence in the practitioner.<sup>10</sup>

A psychologist whose title includes the four letters “ABPP” and the designation of “board-certified specialist in Police and Public Safety Psychology” has been judged by his or her peers to have met the high standards of the specialty. A consumer of that psychologist’s services can be confident

that the psychologist has met the eligibility requirements and has demonstrated acceptable mastery of the foundational competencies (those common to all psychologists) and the functional competencies (those exhibited by psychologists specializing in the particular police and public safety psychology domain of practice).

For police chiefs and administrators, the benefits of board certification in police and public safety psychology include the following:

- **Increased confidence.** As more practitioners become board certified, police administrators, police personnel, and the public can look to ABPPSP board certification in police and public safety psychology as a way of determining that psychologists have obtained the required training and have undergone evaluation by their peers.
- **Specialty knowledge, skills, and experience.** The specialty of police psychology is increasingly complex, and the demands on specialists to be familiar with research, law, standards of practice, and guidelines—including the IACP Police Psychological Services Section guidelines—are substantial. Police chiefs who employ or retain ABPPSP-certified psychologists can be certain that they have demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and in-depth experience required for competent practice in the specialty.

For police psychologists, the benefits of board certification include the following:

- **Consolidation of skills and knowledge.** Psychologists who obtain ABPPSP board certification complete a process of self-examination and assessment that requires them to define and describe the legal, the ethical, and the scientific bases for their practices. The course of the examination requires psychologists to clarify the essential skills and knowledge they rely on for carrying out their particular services. This consolidation affirms what the psychologist knows while also identifying any gaps that will enhance the psychologist’s competence.
- **Streamlined licensing and increased practice mobility.** Some state psychology licensing boards permit licensees from other states to practice in a specific state for a specific period (usually 30 days or less) without obtaining licensure in that state. Others require that the psychologist obtain licensure in that state to practice or provide specific services (for example, psychological evaluations of police applicants) for any period of time. Psychologists who are certified by an ABPP specialty board are recognized by most U.S. psychology licensing boards as having met the requirements for licensure, and, as a result, the application

of a psychologist board certified through ABPP is often simplified.

- **Increased job satisfaction.** Research shows that psychologists who are ABPP board certified enjoy greater job satisfaction and income than those who are not.<sup>11</sup>
- **Quality improvement.** The process of board certification itself, through its demanding examination and candidate self-study procedures, incrementally improves the quality of practice across the specialty. Activities of the American Academy of Police and Public Safety Psychology—the educational branch of the ABPPSP—further improves specialty practice through high-quality continuing education taught by board-certified psychologists.
- **Professional development and advocacy.** Specialty board certification connects those practicing within each specialty area through continuing education, mentoring, and advocacy for the profession.

To be sure, psychologists who choose for any number of reasons not to pursue board certification may still be competent in the specialty of police psychology, but only ABPPSP-certified psychologists have demonstrated that competence to the satisfaction of their peers through a demanding series of

examinations overseen by a nationally recognized certifying organization.

Police psychology will soon be celebrating its 100th anniversary, and the establishment of an ABPP-affiliated specialty board in police and public safety psychology is a sure sign of its maturity and viability. To find police and public safety psychology board-certified specialists in proximity to a local agency or to learn more about the board certification process, visit <http://abppsp.org>. ♦

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Martin I. Kurke and Ellen M. Scrivner, eds., *Police Psychology into the 21st Century* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1995), 10.

<sup>2</sup>In addition to the IACP Police Psychological Services Section, the other two national organizations representing police psychologists are the Society for Police and Criminal Psychology, <http://psychweb.cisat.jmu.edu/spcp> (accessed June 10, 2011); and the American Psychological Association, Division 18 (Psychologists in Public Service) Police and Public Safety Section, <http://www.apa.org/about/division/div18.aspx> (accessed June 10, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Emil Rodolfa et al., "A Cube Model for Competency Development: Implications for Psychology Educators and Regulators," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 36, no. 4 (August 2005): 347–354.

<sup>4</sup>"Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct," *American Psychologist* 57, no. 12 (December 2002): 1060–1073.

<sup>5</sup>Kurke and Scrivner, *Police Psychology into the 21st Century*, 10.

<sup>6</sup>David M. Corey and Audrey L. Honig, "Police Psychology in the 21st Century," *The Police Chief* 75 (October 2008): 138, [http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display\\_arch&article\\_id=1646&issue\\_id=102008](http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1646&issue_id=102008) (accessed June 7, 2011); and Gary Aumiller et al., "Defining the Field of Police Psychology: Core Domains and Proficiencies," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 23, no. 1 (June 29, 2008): 48.

<sup>7</sup>APA Task Force on the Assessment of Competence in Professional Psychology: Final Report (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, October 2006), <http://www.apa.org/ed/resources/competency-revised.pdf> (accessed June 7, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 46.

<sup>9</sup>W. Brad Johnson et al., "Psychology in Extremis: Preventing Problems of Professional Competence in Dangerous Practice Settings," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 42, no. 1 (February 2011): 94–104.

<sup>10</sup>"The Commission," CALEA, <http://www.calea.org/content/commission> (accessed June 7, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Jerry J. Sweet et al., "The TCN/AACN 2005 Salary Survey: Professional Practices, Beliefs, and Incomes of U.S. Neuropsychologists," *The Clinical Neuropsychologist* 20, no. 3 (September 2006): 325–364.

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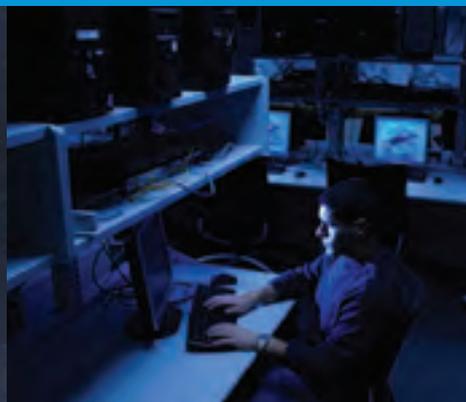
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