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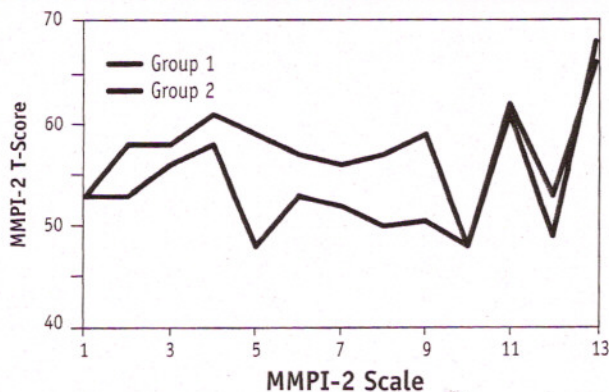
# Preemployment Psychological Screening

## Among Correctional Officers: An Effective Practice?

**A**s an administrative professional within the field of corrections, who, like all of you, faces the difficult task of hiring and retaining correctional officers who are inclined to succeed within our changing field, I felt the need to understand preemployment psychological screening and the benefit that it offers our profession. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory—2nd Edition (MMPI-2) is perhaps the most widely used psychological instrument that we, with the help of professional psychologists, rely on for preemployment psychological screening of correction officer candidates. Some prior research regarding the MMPI-2 has been conducted, but it has utilized *only police*, rather than correctional officer candidates. Therefore, as part of my doctoral research, I designed a study to assess the accuracy with which the MMPI-2 predicted future professional performance among correctional officer candidates. I believe that this study revealed useful information related to hiring competent correctional staff members who are inclined to succeed in today's correctional milieu.

Chart 1

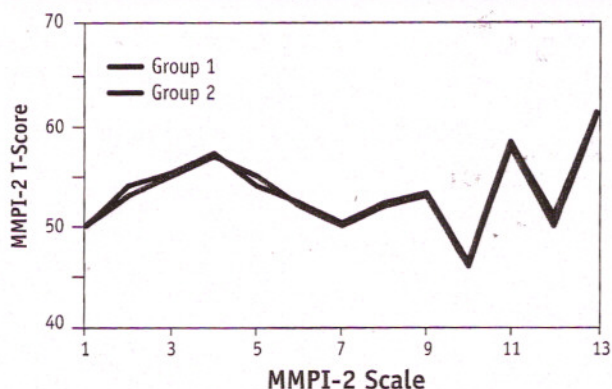
**Absenteeism—Comparison of MMPI-2 T-Scores**



(Note: Scales 11, 12, 13 = scales L, F, K respectively)

Chart 2

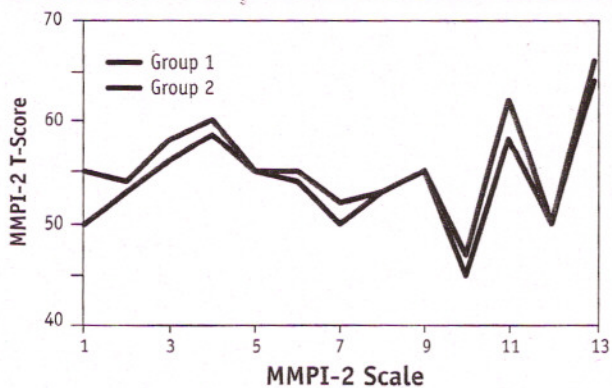
**Communication—Comparison of MMPI-2 T-Scores**



(Note: Scales 11, 12, 13 = scales L, F, K respectively)

Chart 3

**Security—Comparison of MMPI-2 T-Scores**



(Note: Scales 11, 12, 13 = scales L, F, K respectively)

**Introduction and Background:**

**The Problem**

The problem of crowding within this country's penal institutions is pressing. The United States Department of Justice continues to report our escalating rate of incarceration as the

highest in the modern world. Our growing prison/jail population has reached approximately 2 million and despite new construction, this nation's prison/jail space continues to escalate to or beyond 100 percent capacity.

Given these realities, it seems apparent that old methods or philosophies of incarceration must be replaced by new initiatives that have been proven to reduce criminal recidivism. Correctional officers who are anxious to address what many perceive as the inability of our correctional system to restrain recidivism have prompted the initiation of correctional programs designed to counter factors that contribute to high rates of incarceration. As a result, the roles of correctional institutions have begun to be examined in the context of strengthened retributive correctional paradigms (get tough on crime) vs. those correctional practices that accept a degree of responsibility for altering behavior and readying offenders for their return to society.

Those who advocate for programming within corrections do so based upon the assumption or belief that life changes for offenders are possible. Correctional programming efforts within Wisconsin,<sup>1</sup> Delaware,<sup>2</sup> California,<sup>3</sup> and Washington<sup>4</sup> have resulted in a reduction of recidivism on a local level, as well as within large, statewide correctional systems. With all such efforts, correctional personnel were included based upon their willingness to assist in programmatic efforts as part of a collaborative team. As such, each of these programs demonstrated the importance of proactive correctional officers in the attainment of programmatic goals.

When considering alternative treatment for offenders, correctional administrators, facilitators, and contributors must identify staffing needs in the proper context. It stands to reason that such initiatives will have the greatest chance for success if staffed by corrections personnel who are willing to embrace, assist, and act as partners in the difficult process of correctional programming for the purpose of successful offender habilitation and transition.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Kinkade and Jenkins cited the key reasons for failure, misuse, or nonuse of a given rehabilitative program as arising from issues related to the lack of understanding between various disciplines. Shilton concurred when she stated, "Consensus among the citizen advisory boards, corrections professionals, judges, and politicians who ultimately fund these programs is critical." Therefore, it seems essential that correctional officials be screened and hired based upon their ability and/or willingness to participate as part of emerging initiatives within a context of collegiality and partnership.

The difficulty of predicting correctional officer performance has prompted correctional administrators to utilize preemployment psychological assessments as a screening tool to assist them in determining a given candidate's personality characteristics and/or behavioral tendencies as they relate to a career in corrections.<sup>6</sup> The most common psychological assessment that continues to be utilized for preemployment screening in general,<sup>7</sup> as well as among law enforcement candidates,<sup>8</sup> is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, 2nd Edition (MMPI-2).<sup>9</sup> Several studies have focused on the predictive validity of

the MMPI-2 among police officer candidates;<sup>10</sup> however, no such studies exist that relate solely to aspiring correction officers. While there is some similarity between these two law enforcement professions, the unique nature of correctional environments places correctional officers within organizational and environmental contexts that are quite different from those of police officers. Given this reality, it seems important to consider the validity and reliability of preemployment MMPI-2 evaluations as related specifically to employment outcome measures within correctional environments.

#### The Study

The sample utilized within this study was comprised of 100 correctional officers who had been employed within a local correctional facility in mid-state New York for a period of between 2 and 12 years. It was the intent of this study to obtain findings that reflect prevailing employment conditions within corrections; therefore the sample encompassed only those officers who were employed at the time of the study, had elected to leave, or been terminated within the last five years.

Before being hired, each officer was required to complete a psychological evaluation consisting of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, 2nd Edition (MMPI-2). After being hired, each officer received annual performance appraisals, benefit time usage summaries, and periodic evaluations. Utilizing this data, relationships were examined between preemployment MMPI-2 scores and actual employment outcomes for all correctional officers within the sample. The average age of officers used within the sample ( $N = 100$ ) was 37, with age ranging from 27 to 58. Table 1 depicts demographic data related to the sample regarding race and ethnicity.

#### Design—Procedure

The design of this study was correlational in nature and utilized an archival study to examine MMPI-2 assessment results and corresponding employment records for correctional officers comprising the study sample ( $N = 100$ ). Utilizing correlational sta-

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As absenteeism is always a concern within correctional institutions, it is useful for administrators to recognize that *the MMPI-2 seems to offer a "preemployment glimpse" of an officer's future as it relates to absenteeism.*

tistics, relationships were established between preemployment MMPI-2 scores and three employment outcome measures, *absenteeism*, *performance of security functions*, and *communication effectiveness*. Employment outcome measures were representative of a two-year period, 1997 to the end of 1998, and were determined by review of employment records.

Benefit time usage summaries and employment appraisals were perused to obtain data connected with each of the three employment outcome measures (*absenteeism*, *performance of security functions*, and *communication effectiveness*). Two officer groups were established for each of these variables, one for officers rated satisfactory, the other for those rated unsatisfactory. Mean MMPI-2 scale scores were calculated for all employees within each group and statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate differences between the two groups of officers (satisfactory vs. unsatisfactory).

## Results

### Absenteeism

Group #1 ( $n = 74$ ) represented those officers who recorded an excessive rate of absenteeism (in excess of 7 days per year) and Group #2 ( $n = 17$ ) represented those who were not excessively absent (fewer than 6 days per year). Analysis resulted in statistically significant findings regarding this variable and several of the MMPI-2 scales. These findings differentiated

between the two groups (excessively absent and not excessively absent) on MMPI-2 scales 5 and 9 with a high degree of statistical certainty or power. Therefore, despite the relatively small sample size, it is safe to presume that MMPI-2 outcomes yield useful information related to an officer candidate's likelihood to accrue high rates of absenteeism. As absenteeism is always a concern within correctional institutions, it is useful for administrators to recognize that *the MMPI-2 seems to offer a "pre-employment glimpse" of an officer's future as it relates to absenteeism.* Chart 1 compares the MMPI-2 scaled scores of Group #1 (excessively absent) and Group #2 (not excessively absent).

### Communication

Group #1 ( $n = 19$ ) consisted of officers who exhibited unsatisfactory professional communication and Group #2 ( $n = 81$ ) of officers who communicated effectively. Statistical analyses resulted in findings that showed no significant finding between MMPI-2 scaled scores and effective communication among correctional officers. In fact, as can be noted on Chart 2 below, the two study groups (poor communicators and effective communicators) yielded virtually identical MMPI-2 scores. Therefore, despite the relatively small sample size it seems safe to conclude that the MMPI-2 is not *effective* in predicting an officer candidate's propensity toward effective professional communication.

### Security

Group #1 ( $n = 16$ ) contained those officers who performed security functions unsatisfactorily and Group #2 ( $n = 84$ ) contained officers who performed security functions satisfactorily. Initial statistical analyses resulted in findings of significance on MMPI-2 scales 1 and 3 differentiating those officers who performed security functions unsatisfactorily from those who were satisfactory. Unfortunately, post hoc statistical analyses lowered the statistical power or level of confidence related to these findings of this study; it is *not prudent to suggest that the MMPI-2 offers meaningful information related to one's ability to perform security functions at a satisfactory level.*

Though not statistically significant, the fact that differences were recorded between the 2 groups (unsatisfactory and satisfactory) calls for research related to this area of professional performance (security). Chart 3 depicts MMPI-2 scores as they related to performance of security functions.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

Based upon the results of this research, it would be an overstatement to assert that the MMPI-2 standard scales are effective in predicting all pertinent behaviors of a correctional officer candidate. Results obtained on the MMPI-2 standard scales did not correlate with a correctional officer's ability to communicate in a professional, proactive manner. Further, results of this study showed some correlation between MMPI-2 scores and correctional officers' ability to perform security functions; however, insufficient statistical power prevented meaningful conclusions regarding this area of performance. This study did offer highly significant statistical conclusions that elevated scores on MMPI-2 standard scales 5 and 9 offer strong positive correlation with excessive absenteeism among correctional officers.

Table 1

Gender	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic American	Totals
Male	74 (74%)	9 (9%)	5 (5%)	88 (88%)
Female	10 (10%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	12 (12%)
Totals	84 (84%)	11 (11%)	5 (5%)	100 (100%)

While these conclusions offer meaningful information to the field of corrections at large, it must be understood that continuing research is needed to enhance the ability of psychological test batteries to predict behaviors that are important to success within our profession. Future comparative analyses should include newer instruments such as the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) for law enforcement, corrections, and public safety that utilized a normative sample of 17,757 police officers, communications dispatchers, correctional officers, and firefighters<sup>11</sup> and/or the Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI).<sup>12</sup> Further, such studies must not assume that samples of police officers are the same or similar to samples of correctional officers and must utilize normative samples comprised solely of correctional officers. It is the sincere hope of this writer that independent research be conducted for this purpose, so that useful psychological test batteries are developed thereby increasing the likelihood that only correctional officers who are equipped to handle the rigors of the profession are hired. This predilection springs from the recognition that the best hope for changing a people-oriented business such as corrections, which operates within a closed atmosphere, is through the professionals that work within it, the correctional officers. ☎

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## Endnotes

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