

POLICE CHIEF

LEADERSHIP

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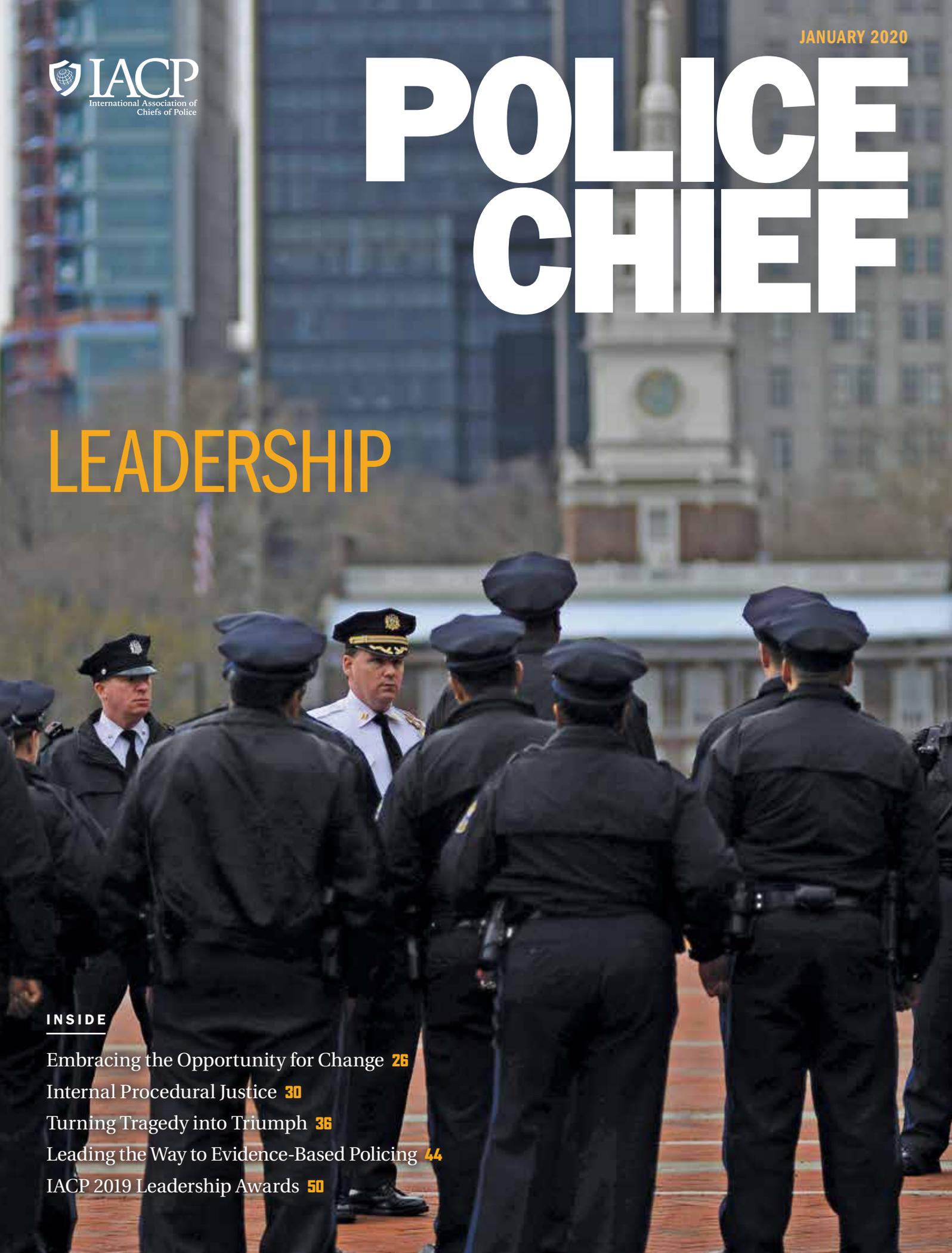
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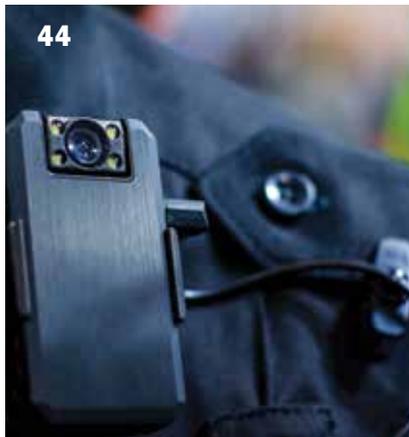
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Police Chief articles are written by law enforcement leaders and experts.

See the authors featured in this issue below.

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The Different Types of Fitness Testing in Law Enforcement

BY

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THE USE OF FITNESS TESTING IN LAW ENFORCEMENT IS OFTEN A CONTENTIOUS ISSUE. THIS IS TRUE EVEN WHEN THE NEED FOR ASSESSMENTS CAN BE SUPPORTED; THE TESTS SELECTED AND THE SETTING OF STANDARDS BECOME CHALLENGES. QUESTIONS OF WHETHER STANDARDS SHOULD BE AGE- AND GENDER-NEUTRAL OR GRADED OFTEN ADD TO THE COMPLEXITY OF FITNESS TESTING.

Research evidence is likewise conflicting with some measures of fitness related to injury or an occupational task, while not with others. Even the same measure, like a two-mile run, can be strongly associated with, and even predictive of, injury and poor task performance in one study but not in another. As a result, the selection of appropriate physical fitness tests and the setting of standards have

conflicting viewpoints and supporting evidence.

One of the predominant reasons for this conflict and confusion stems from a lack of clarity and understanding regarding the purpose of the physical fitness testing, aside from a generic “fitness for duty” tagline, with officers of all rank levels. If the purpose of the fitness assessment is not clearly articulated, it becomes difficult to justify. When establishing and validating a fitness testing program, it is imperative that the reason for the test is clearly ascertained. Is the test to be used as a predictor of injury risk? Or a measure of health and well-being? Or ability to perform occupational tasks? While the initial answer may be “yes” to all of the above, these three potential uses are not mutually inclusive.

FITNESS TESTING FOR INJURY PREVENTION

Typically, initial recruit training is conducted over a short, intense period, and the physical demands placed on the body differ from those placed on officers during general duties. These differences and the more intensive nature of training helps explain why recruits are at a higher risk of physical training-based injuries, such as muscle stressing, than incumbent officers during general duties. It should be noted that at this stage, completing the requirements of recruit training is the job for which the recruits are employed; therefore, fitness requirements for recruit training should differ from those of incumbent officers. On this basis, fitness tests can be effectively employed to identify recruits at a greater risk of injury

and training failure—suppositions that are supported by research.

A similar rationale may exist for injury screening physical testing prior to incumbent officers completing requalification courses, like defensive tactics, where the physical demands placed on the body are inherently greater than that required of general duties. The levels of fitness required to mitigate injury risk are designed to identify those who would be at a higher risk of injury regardless of age or sex.

FITNESS TESTING FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Research has shown that police officers typically lose fitness upon leaving the academy and that police officers are at a greater risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) than other members of the general public. Shift work, long work hours, stress, lifestyle, and more play a role in impacting the fitness and CVD risk of incumbent officers. Given that these work stressors exist and that CVD risks are greater, it should be vital that new recruits wishing to join this vocation are at least as healthy as their age- and gender-matched counterparts within the general public. The same could be said for maintaining a duty of care for incumbent officers. The use of age- and gender-graded fitness testing is valuable as recruits—and incumbent officers—below the health and fitness standards of their age-matched civilian counterparts may potentially be at a greater risk of illness and mortality. Early identification of this risk may help to mitigate future life-threatening concerns.

FITNESS TESTING AS AN OCCUPATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Fitness tests that serve as a measure of occupational task performance are based on the officer's physical ability to complete a task. While there may be some variations in standards, these are based on potential differences in job task requirements rather than age or sex. These variations may come with job roles (e.g., cyber versus K9 squad, foot patrol, or custody) or with rank. Given that the

physical fitness tests are developed to represent job tasks of a given role or rank, these test requirements are age and gender neutral, as failure to complete these tasks can place the officer, fellow officers, or the general public at risk. These occupational physical fitness assessments also serve to provide a benchmark for officers returning to work following injury or for those wishing to change job roles.

EMPLOYING FITNESS TESTING FRAMEWORKS

After identifying the intent of the framework, and prior to its employment, department-specific research is needed. Every department is different, from the demographics of recruits joining (and, hence, fitness standards) to the training undertaken and to the job stresses and occupational requirements. As such, a one-size-fits-all approach does not work and may explain why the research is conflicting. For example, a two-mile run may predict injury risk in a recruit academy that employs a high volume of running and moving around large areas on foot. Conversely, an academy that has little running and is conducted in a confined area, may fail to find these standards, if not the assessment itself, to be predictive of injury. The same applies for fitness standards employed for a given assessment; while a generic time for a two-mile run may be easier to administer, it may fall short of meeting intent. For example, if the concomitant aerobic fitness requirements to meet a given two-mile run time are being used as a measure of health, fitness, and injury risk for new recruits, the fitness level required of a 45-year-old male or 25-year-old female, when matching the health of the general public, may be below what is required to be at a low risk of injury during training. As such, departmental specificity is vital to ensuring valid standards.

GRADED OR NEUTRAL ASSESSMENTS

Determining which assessments should or should not be age or gender neutral is solely dependent on the reason for the fitness assessment. If the test serves

KEY POINTS

- Each law enforcement organization has a unique operating environment.
- One size usually does not fit all.
- Different physical requirements may exist based on relevant job tasks (K9, investigative, patrol, etc.).
- Be extremely specific on the goal of the physical fitness assessment—injury mitigation, health and wellness, or occupational capability.
- Determine if age- or gender-neutral standards are appropriate based on the type of assessment.
- Validate findings according to federal and state employment practices.

as means of identifying injury risk or as a measure of occupational task performance, it needs to be age and sex neutral. For example, if a firefighter had to climb a 10-foot ladder as an occupational requirement or a soldier needed to carry a 40-pound artillery shell to the gun line, the ladder could not be made shorter, nor the artillery shell made lighter, to accommodate age or sex. Conversely, if the test is to be a measure of health and well-being, then the use of age- and gender-graded standards will allow for comparisons of recruits and officers against the general population.

SUMMATION

The purpose behind and employment of physical fitness tests must be clearly understood, whether the tests be for injury risk management, health and well-being, or assessment of occupational capability. The specific reason for the assessment must be clearly articulated. This understanding will guide whether the assessments should be age or gender neutral or graded. While adhering to the above guidelines, the physical fitness tests and standards need to be department specific to cater for diversities in demographics, training approaches, and occupational requirements. ☑