



EVALUATION OF THE PHYSICAL SKILLS TEST DUTCH POLICE



REGIOPLAN
BELEIDSONDERZOEK

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- summary -

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SUMMARY

Background

It was agreed in the Police CLA that the fitness and health of police personnel is a crucial part of the HRM policy. The physical skills test (abbreviated in Dutch as 'FVT') was developed to determine the fitness of police personnel. This test measures whether participants are in good enough physical condition and have the physical skills required to perform police work adequately. After a period of voluntary participation, participation in the FVT has been mandatory since 2012 for all operational police employees who fall under the Police Use of Force (Review) Regulations (RTGP) and who have a force code (*geweldscode*) of 3 or higher (almost 40,000 employees). This requirement was confirmed by ministerial regulation on 1 January 2015. For the time being, no consequences have been attached to the failure to achieve the FVT within the standards set.

In cooperation with the Mulier Institute and commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Security and Justice, Regioplan carried out an evaluation of the effect of the FVT.

Research objective and principal questions

The aim of the study was to obtain insight into the practical implementation and degree to which the Physical Skills Test (FVT) achieves the goal set. The study concentrated on the following three principal questions:

- **To what extent is the practical implementation of the FVT progressing as envisioned by the Police FVT Regulations?**
- **To what extent are the policy goals of the FVT being achieved?**
- **How can the FVT be improved?**

Structure of the study

The study consisted of three main components:

- file analysis;
- information collection via interviews and surveys within the police organisation;
- utilisation of other organisations' experience with physical skills test.

File analysis

We used file analyses to analyse whether there are differences in participation or non-participation in the FVT and the test results according to personal characteristics, positions, units and sickness absence. For these analyses, the police put together a registration file containing data of all police employees required to undergo the FVT for the years 2015 and 2016.

Information collection in the police organisation

In order to obtain insight into the implementation of the FVT:

- key persons on the central level were interviewed;
- interviews and surveys were conducted among three regional units of the national police organisation. Based on participation and success rates for the FVT, the following units were approached: North Holland (highest participation rate nationally), West Brabant (lowest participation rate) and Rotterdam (lowest success rate and working in and around a large city);
- OBT team managers of the other units were interviewed.

Utilisation of experiences in relation to set-up and standards for the FVT

In order to utilise the experiences from other organisations that also use physical skills tests, interviews were held with representatives from the fire brigade, defence department, KNVB (football referees) and KNRM (life guards).

An introductory literature survey (of both international and national publications) was also carried out to obtain more insight into the advantages and disadvantages of different types of standards for tests (relative versus absolute).

Finally, an expert meeting was organised with stakeholders to discuss the possibilities of expanding the extent to which the FVT achieves its goal.

Results

Preparation for the FVT

Police employees said they were given sufficient information about the FVT and given adequate opportunities to take the FVT. The guidance during the FVT mainly focused on how the test could best be taken and how to avoid injury during the test. Little attention was paid to the link between the FVT and the police-specific physical condition and skills required in practice. Supervisors also gave little information concerning this. Employees can look up this information on the FVT website, however. Specific (physical) preparation by participants takes place sporadically.

Scheduling

Both supervisors and FVT participants reported that the scheduling of the FVT generally takes place smoothly. When problems do arise in the scheduling, these are primarily the result of limited capacity in the performance of duties of the base teams and not so much the capacity at the OBT centres.

Participation

Despite the FVT having been made mandatory, it emerged in practice that the national participation in the FVT was around 70 percent in 2015 and 2016. The success rate was approximately 90 percent.

Injuries

Injuries while taking the FVT occurred in all units, but were not the order of the day. The box and moving of the medicine balls are often cited as parts of the test in which people became injured. The moving of the dummy, immediately after performing the FVT, also caused injuries relatively frequently. The dummy has since been removed from the standardised part of the FVT track.

Failure to pass FVT

In far from all cases did the failure to pass the FVT result in a discussion with the supervisor concerning this. Some supervisors discussed the FVT during annual reviews and in some cases an action plan was made if the employee was not fit enough. Supervisors stress that because of the absence of employment-law consequences, they are not in a position to attach sanctions during these talks to any failure to pass the FVT. This also makes it impossible to make any referrals to the company doctor, for instance.

Non-participation

In 2015 and 2016, approximately 30 percent of employees for whom the FVT was mandatory did not take the FVT. In the registration files, three reasons for non-participation were reported. In 2016 the breakdown among these reasons was as follows:

- Not scheduled: 45 percent of the group of non-participants (just over 5,100 police employees). The reason why the test was not scheduled cannot be concluded from the registration files. Explanations were put forward for subpopulations, but these could not be verified in this evaluation by the police or by the researchers.
- Impediment: 37 percent of the group of non-participants (just over 4,200 police employees). In virtually all cases, this concerned a medical impediment. This is a legitimate reason for getting a deferral of participation in the FVT.
- No-show: 17 percent of the group of non-participants (almost 2,000 police employees). These are cases in which the particular person was indeed scheduled for the FVT, but failed to show up for the FVT without a reason.

Talks with non-participants

Supervisors are aware that they are supposed to hold talks with non-participants in which the particular employee is asked for an explanation. It is not clear whether supervisors hold these talks in all cases. It is clear, however, that the FVT is more of a priority for some supervisors than for others. In the event of legitimate non-participation, supervisors are often aware of this. No written deferral is granted by the competent authority, however. Supervisors sometimes have the impression that impediments and injuries are

exaggerated or feigned in order to avoid participation. It is also relatively easy to cry off taking the FVT on the day itself because of a medical impediment. In the event of a no-show, the particular police employees are more often called to account, either by the team manager or the OBT team manager, and asked for an explanation. The number of no-shows decreased in 2016 by just over 30 percent compared to 2015.

According to supervisors, participants who are not scheduled do not appear in the overviews they receive periodically. This group remains outside the picture for supervisors and therefore no talks concerning the FVT are held with them.

Catch up on FVT

Virtually all units find catching up on the FVT problematic. Catching up on the test largely comes down to the non-participant's own responsibility, which in practice means that this rarely happens (despite the fact that opportunities to catch up on the test are offered).

Sport programmes and other initiatives

There are sport programmes for participants who are not as fit, for instance fit@NP, where tailor-made programs are offered. While some units said that virtually everyone can participate in the programme, others believe that an employee must be seriously overweight or markedly out of shape before he/she is eligible for fit@NP.

At all units there are ample sporting initiatives outside of working hours. These are largely obligation-free and at the end of the day it is often the employees who are fond of sports, who pass the FVT without difficulty anyway, who frequently take part in these.

Background of non-participants

The registration files indicate that non-participants:

- are more often women,
- are on average three years older than the average police employee for whom the FVT is mandatory;
- are on average absent due to illness 30 days more than police employees who do take the FVT;
- are overrepresented in particular positions, including the positions of Assistant Intake & Service, Reassignable Candidates and Control Room Employee.

During the interviews, certain background characteristics of non-participants were mentioned more often: aged 40 and over, not fond of sports and struggling with their weight. It is noted here that many of these non-participants have a valid reason for not participating, such as a (chronic) injury or other medical limitation.

Record keeping

The record keeping now reasonably satisfies the wishes of the supervisors. Team managers generally receive overviews on a frequent basis summarising the state of affairs concerning participation/non-participation. It did emerge from the talks that supervisors do not have a view on the number of employees who are not scheduled. This group is apparently not included in the overviews mentioned.

The FVT participants themselves are told their results after taking the FVT. Subsequent to that they generally have no access to/control of their own records.

Sanctions

No sanctions are attached to the failure to participate or failure to pass the FVT. Supervisors generally say they would not be in favour of sanctions. If, for instance, police employees were (temporarily) suspended as a sanction, this would cause capacity problems in having the regular police duties performed. Supervisors would therefore prefer to boost participation in the FVT through positive encouragement. Better facilitation - and increased facilitation - of sport activities, during working hours or otherwise, is often mentioned as an option for encouraging participation.

Extent to which goal is achieved

The importance of fitness among police employees and the use of the test in charting this out are generally supported by the supervisors. There is less agreement, however, on whether the FVT is actually a suitable instrument for that. According to some supervisors, the test results do indeed provide a reasonable picture of overall fitness. Several conversation partners told us, however, that the skills and fitness required for the FVT are extremely specific and that good test results are no guarantee of good overall fitness. The example of employees who perform well but who scored poorly on the FVT was also mentioned repeatedly. The question arises therefore of how well the FVT reflects what is required in order to perform the position adequately. The link between the components of the FVT and actual police work is often not recognised or not sufficiently recognised by supervisors and FVT participants alike.

The results of the FVT seem to seldom serve as a starting point for policy decisions in relation to the fitness of the personnel. If police employees are not physically fit, the supervisor is often already aware of this fact and it is not the FVT that provides this insight.

Standard times

The FVT uses relative standards, differentiated according to age and gender. Relative standard scores compare the performances of a participant with those of a reference group, and not with an absolute minimum requirement which is expected of the members of a professional group.

Advantages and disadvantages of relative and absolute standard times

One important advantage of a relative standard is that the standard can be easily determined, provided the standard group is representative. However, the selected standard times remain arbitrary. One disadvantage of a relative standard is that it is not clear whether the standard satisfies the tasks which are performed in practice.

The advantage of an absolute standard is that the standard is determined based on the requirements of a profession. The disadvantage is that this standard is often difficult to establish in practice.

The choice of relative or absolute standard times is strongly connected with the goal of the test. An absolute standard is more suitable for determining whether employees are 'fit for the job'. With a relative standard, however, participants receive more insight into how they perform compared to others, and a mirror is held up to them regarding their fitness. This provides a general view of the fitness of employees.

Representativeness of the standard group

The composition of the standard group is not entirely representative of the current population of police employees required to undergo the FVT. In the standard group (2012), there were more men represented than in the current population. Because of the gender-specific standards, however, this has no influence on the current target times divided into groups.

The representativeness of the current target times can also be called into question on three other points:

- The target times for some target groups (especially women aged 55-65 years) are based on small numbers of participants.
- The target times are based on a standard group in which people have voluntarily participated in the FVT.
- The target times are determined based on scores for the tests of employees who have performed the FVT for the first or second time. By now, all employees have performed the test more often and may now perform the test quite a bit better because of the learning effect.

Recommendations for standard times

The target times which are used have been determined five years ago, in 2012, based on a voluntary group of people who have performed the FVT. Consequently, a recalibration of the target times for the FVT based on recent data is one of the possibilities. This can make use of the most recent test scores of employees who were required to undergo the FVT. To have the test standard be as accurate a reflection as possible of the physical effort demanded in the work of an employee required to undergo the FVT, the following points of attention can be included in the calibration:

- Is it desirable to maintain gender-specific and age-specific target times? The target group itself can also be involved in answering this question. When there is the assumption that employees must satisfy the same requirements in order to complete a task, the decision can be made to include no differences according to gender or age, as is done with the fire

brigade. Fire brigade employees themselves indicate that a difference in target times according to gender is not desirable.

- Can target times be differentiated according to function (groups)? Similar to the FIT at the Defence department, an option can be to develop different tests for police personnel with different (special) function profiles.
- Is it worthwhile to determine the target times based on a combination of relative and absolute standardisations? For instance, this can be done by using the judgement of experts in addition to the data of a standard group in order to determine a minimum requirement to be able to perform the work safely, efficiently and soundly.

Conclusions

Practical implementation

The practical implementation of the FVT is not progressing entirely as envisioned in the FVT Regulation, which prescribes that all employees for whom the FVT is mandatory must successfully pass the FVT at least once a year. This is not achieved in practice. In 2016, 66 percent of the employees for whom the FVT is mandatory actually passed the FVT. In far from all cases did non-participation in the FVT or the failure to pass the FVT result in a discussion with the supervisor concerning this.

In addition, based on the records file used for this research, it can be determined that 11 percent of all employees for whom the FVT is mandatory have a medical impediment. Together with the importance of being on duty and other impediments, this is one of the reasons why the competent authority can grant a deferral under the Regulations. Based on file analysis, it cannot be determined to what extent deferrals are granted. Based on interviews with supervisors, surveys among non-participants and visits to test locations, we conclude that the granting of deferrals by the competent authority is not common practice.

Policy goals of the FVT

The FVT is supposed to give the participant insight into his/her police-specific fitness and the physical skills that are necessary to perform the job professionally. These test results are subsequently supposed to provide the supervisors and other users of the results with insight into the physical fitness of the employees for whom the FVT is mandatory. In practice, the extent to which the FVT achieves its goal is limited. An important reason for this is that many do not see the FVT as the right instrument for measuring the physical fitness and skills necessary for police work. Although the link between actual police work and the test is recognised by most respondents, many doubt whether there is a one-to-one correlation between passing the test and performing well in actual police work. Supervisors also say they are generally reasonably aware of the physical fitness of their employees and that it is not the FVT that gives them this insight. The FVT results also seldom prompt

specific actions by management or by the employee him/herself focused on yet passing the FVT. The lack of any legal consequences in relation to the employee's position or training opportunities during working hours are often mentioned as reasons why passing the FVT is generally not a very high priority for either employees for whom the FVT is mandatory or supervisors.

Possibilities for improving the FVT

Practical implementation

In order to increase participation in the FVT, it is necessary to manage more on the basis of the FVT throughout the police force and the physical fitness of the police personnel must become one of the priorities of the competent authority. This means in practice that not only must talks be held with non-participants and those who fail the test, but that it must also be monitored that a second attempt at the FVT must be undertaken during the same year. The granting of a deferral by the competent authority in the event of legitimate non-participation (medical impediment, importance of performing duties or other impediments) and follow-up on that can also be organised more vigilantly. It would make sense in this context for the company doctor to be given an active role in providing guidance to employees who fail the test and employees who cannot participate in the test because of an injury.

It is also important to get a view and grip on the group of employees who are not scheduled. The reasons why police employees are not scheduled must be figured out. This will bring non-legitimate cases into the picture and these individuals can be called to account. At the same time, legitimate non-participation currently entered as not scheduled, such as a medical impediment, long-term sickness absence or an impediment because of duty, can be recorded as such. This would also bring any administrative shortcomings to light.

The cooperation between supervisors can also be improved in this area. Mentioned in this context are more frequent meetings in which supervisors work on raising awareness about fitness of police personnel and in which best practices are shared. A last often-cited suggestion is to make the goal of the FVT broader than fitness alone. For instance, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, (exercise, nutrition and sleep) and in doing so reducing sickness absence among police personnel could also be included as objectives of the test. Ultimately, these changes should culminate in a shared culture in which the employer and employee bear shared responsibility for a healthy lifestyle and participation in the FVT is seen as natural throughout the entire police organisation.

Face validity

In order to strengthen the link with practice, more practically oriented elements could be incorporated in the test. Another suggestion is, in line with the new IVT style, to give the IVT lecturer more professional freedom and authority to him/herself put together training programmes tailor-made for participants and

in doing so increase the reality content of the test. A recalibration (see also under standards) of the SVT could indicate whether the test elements still adequately reflect current practice.

Standards

The target times which are used for the FVT have been determined in 2012 based on a voluntary group of people who have performed the FVT. Consequently, a recalibration of the FVT standard based on recent data is one of the possibilities. An option is to reconsider whether it is desirable to maintain gender-specific and age-specific target times. However, this may run counter to the diversity policy maintained by the police which dictates that physical differences among police employees may not lead to the exclusion of persons for certain tasks. In addition, it can be valuable to not only determine the target times based on a relative standard and an 'arbitrary' cut-off point, but to create a combination of relative and absolute standardisations, where experts determine a minimum requirement to be able to perform the work safely, efficiently and soundly, for instance. Moreover, it is difficult to determine an (absolute) standard based on police practice, because it is not clear which standards the practice sets precisely. Finally, the development of different tests with associated standards for different (special) function profiles is often named as an alternative, similar to the FIT at the Defence department.

Sanctions

Positive encouragement of participation instead of sanctions for non-participation or for failing the FVT are preferred by virtually all the parties involved. Nonetheless, sanctions (suspension, surrender weapon, change to duties) emerged in practice to, in certain cases, be an effective way of getting people to take this test seriously. Less drastic consequences than suspension could also be chosen. One of the possibilities is to aim for a talk with a lifestyle coach or following an intervention. At the Defence Department, failing the FIT results in a reassessment of whether the employee may be better placed on a different team. This could also be a possibility of the police organisation. The possibility of introducing multiple categories for passing the test can also be considered.

According to supervisors, having physical fitness and the overall health of the employee made part of the annual performance reviews would be a step in the right direction. During this review, if necessary, agreements could be made on getting the employee's fitness to a desired level, in which the supervisor encourages and facilitates a particular employee. If the employee fails to follow through on agreements, it could be looked into whether legal consequences for the position should be attached to this. Attaching legal consequences for the position to the FVT is extremely complicated, however. For this reason, a majority of the respondents believe it is wise to first work on the preconditions (facilitating sport, raising overall awareness of the importance of fitness and permanent employability) and after that, look into how consequences could be

attached for employees who do not adapt to culture in which health and vitality are focal points.

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