

Do Police Officers Need to
Obtain a College Education?

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This question of whether or not police officers need college education has arisen with greater interest in the past two decades more than any previous. This caused some precincts across the country to require at least a 2-year degree before being hired on as a police officer. There have been many reports done on the specific effects of police officers with or without college degrees varying from 2 year degrees and higher compared to those with only a high school education. Different sub topics may include “The Impact of Higher Education on Police Officer Attitudes Towards Abuse of Authority”, and “Exploring the impact of police officer education level on allegations of police misconduct” to name two.

One study was performed over a ten year period from the time of hire called “College Education and Police Job Performance: A Ten-year Study”, written by Donald M. Truxillo. The study was done to see if a college education produced more positive results in job performance also to know if it reduced disciplinary action from superiors. The data collected was ongoing throughout the ten years in question using 84 law enforcement officers in a southern, metropolitan police department. The data was informally collected with the consent of the officers as long as their names were left anonymous and their personal information made confidential. Some of the results yielded from this particular study is that the greatest effect college education had was in promotions which in turn leads to higher pay. However a college education caused minimal effects to how many times a police officer was disciplined. Also it showed that taking criminal justice credits versus other general education credits provided little for the officer’s job performance. That a broad general education provides the same basis for results in job performance. In the words of the study article, “the relationship

patterns between education variables and disciplinary variables is worth note. If a jurisdiction's primary reason for increasing its education requirements is to reduce disciplinary problems, the data from this study are not strongly supportive.” (Truxillo)

To support and also contrast the findings of the ten year study in a different way is to use information from an article named “The Impact of Higher Education on Police Officer Attitudes Towards Abuse of Authority”, by Cody W. Telep. The data from this article were extracted from a larger pool of 925 police officers that was nationally representative using nine questions. The findings were based on varied questions to figure out the opinion the officer had about using abuse as an authoritarian tool and how outsiders see police brutality. “Officers with a pre-service bachelor’s degree held attitudes that were less supportive of abuse of authority. These effects remained regardless of when officers received their degree and across varying levels of higher education (i.e. associate’s degree, attending some college). Officers with a bachelor degree had significantly more desirable attitudes across all three methods of measurement. The magnitude of this difference was particularly sizable when officers with a bachelor’s degree were compared to officers with just a high school diploma.” (Telep)

In addition the article “Exploring The Impact Of Police Officer Education Level On Allegations Of Police Misconduct” sees if there is link between the officer’s level education and how much they are reported for misconduct. In this article they use information that is from formal and informal complaints that were filed against officers in Mid-western police agency. The main conclusion of this article is that an officer with college education has fewer complaints filed against them. However it also asserts “In

contrast to these studies, Lersch and Kunzman found that ‘there were no significant differences between deputies with a two-year degree and those with a four-year degree in terms of total citizen complaints, administrative referrals, and sustained complaints’ (Manis) One peculiar finding from this article is that supervisors filed more complaints on the police officers with four-year degrees than their counterparts and they violated policies with the same frequency as those with two-year degrees. Nonetheless it states “...less educated and less experienced officers are more likely to have their complaints sustained” (Manis)

I would say, based on various articles, that a college education would only benefit a police officer whether it was obtained prior to becoming a police officer or while on the job. However, that doesn’t mean police departments around the country have to make college education an application requirement. Perhaps it might be in the interest of a police department to help an officer achieve a degree in college while employed though. The police academies currently seem to be adequate enough to supply an officer with strong fundamentals prior to normal officer duty. Then the experience an officer gains on the job seems to give them just as much of learning experience a degree would ever provide to be a street cop. It is noteworthy to say that all of the articles mentioned how more data needed to be evaluated and used in order to verify their findings.

Also among the articles, education had the same effect across all racial lines in job performance and discipline. There weren’t any significant differences between male and female either on education results. Keeping in mind that still most of the police force consists of white males across the country. The race ratio follows mainly the general population of where a certain precinct resides in this day and age significantly

more than in the past. The most significant changes across the country have been the integration of more minorities in the police force. One example is “in 1974, minorities represented 11.6% of the NYPD, but that number rose to 31.1% by 1999, with 13.4% black and 17.2% Hispanic. As of 2009, the NYPD is 47.5% Caucasian, 28.9% Hispanic, 17.9% African-American, and 5.5% Asian.” (Bornstein)

Works Cited

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