
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION, EXPERIENCE, AND POLICE PERFORMANCE

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This study used data from 299 police officers from 12 municipal police departments across the state of Virginia to determine the relationship between education and police performance. Performance was measured by supervisor evaluations of each officer's overall performance, communication skills, public relations skills, report writing skills, response to new training, decision making ability, and commitment to the police department. Significant correlations were found between education and most measures of performance. Most importantly, the results show a significant correlation between overall performance and education ($r=.24, p<.001$). The only variables not proving to be significantly related to education were objective measures of the volume of arrests, number of times the officer required discipline, and number of accidents. Interestingly, the benefits of a college education do not become apparent until police officers gain experience. In addition, police officers with only a high school diploma decreased in overall performance after five years of experience.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify past research findings on whether education is significantly related to police performance. This study differs from past research because it examines how the interaction of education and experience affects police officer's job performance.

HISTORY OF EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

Over time, the roles of police officers have become increasingly complex. Obvious factors influencing the complexity of police officers' jobs are increased crime rate and changing demographics. Another contributing factor was widespread social upheaval during the 1960s. Along with opposition to the Vietnam War and the government, the civil rights movement was causing unrest in many parts of the country. Many times police officers were needed for crowd control during protests and as representatives of the law and the government. Police officers often found themselves conflicting with minorities. Seldom was there a clear answer on how police officers should handle these situations. Therefore, when conflicts arose, the police often became the targets of criticism. Questions arose as to whether the police officers made the right decisions. The public's examination of police personnel efficiency, decision making ability, and professionalism became widespread.

In response to these criticisms of police departments, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice explored the possibility of requiring police officers to possess a college degree. In its 1967 report, the Commission stated that it believed a college education would enhance police officers' job performance. The Commission established a goal of requiring a baccalaureate degree as a minimum standard for employment.

The 1973 report from the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals stated that by 1978 all police agencies should require that applicants possess at least three years of college education prior to employment. This requirement was suggested because a college education is believed to increase department professionalism through the development of writing, interpersonal, and problem solving skills. This 1978 goal has never been fulfilled due to the lack of convincing evidence that a college education, does indeed, significantly enhance police performance.

During the 1980's, education requirements became less of an issue. The decreased importance of education is in part due to the large increase in the crime rate, namely drug trafficking. This inflated crime rate boosted the need for a quick increase in the number of officers. However, education requirements again came to the forefront in 1988 when the Police Executive Research Forum suggested that police agencies should require a college degree as a prerequisite for employment. Despite these suggestions, only 14 percent of all police departments surveyed by Carter and Sapp (1992) require applicants to hold a baccalaureate degree to be eligible for employment.

THE MAKE-UP OF AN EFFECTIVE POLICE OFFICER

The importance of a college education can be seen by looking at the complexity of police work. Police officers are involved in many interpersonal and non-enforcement activities. In addition to officers' roles as law enforcers, they have the added roles of social service and order maintenance. Also, while performing these roles the officers must be aware of and adjust themselves accordingly to the individual differences among the people within the community (Roberg, 1978).

Before higher education's effect on police performance can be researched, the criteria for good police performance must be established. Problems arise when trying to define effective police performance because there is considerable ambiguity in distinguishing what makes a police officer good (Aamodt, 1995; Cascio, 1977; Carter & Sapp, 1992). An example given by Carter and Sapp (1992) is that cynicism and authoritarianism are generally considered to be poor traits for a person to possess, but some critics feel that police officers need to be authoritarian and cynical so they will not be viewed as gullible. Differing interpretations of whether traits are positive or negative could be because of police officers' wide range of duties.

As agreement among researchers on what constitutes an effective police officer tends to be scarce, for this paper we will use Goldstein's (1977) explanation of the make-up of a good police officer. According to Goldstein, effective police officers should possess these five qualities: (1) intelligence, (2) tolerance and understanding of cultural differences, (3) values which support controls on police conduct, (4) self-discipline, and (5) the ability to control one's emotions. Roberg (1978) explained further that to be effective, a police officer must understand the sociological and psychological make-up of the community in which he or she polices.

Therefore, we must consider the effect of a college education on these factors or traits. If a college education develops, or at the very least, enhances, Goldstein's qualities for an effective police officer, then a college education should increase performance. Research indicates that a college education facilitates the development of traits that coincide with Goldstein's essential five qualities.

Studies show that college educated individuals tend to be more flexible, less authoritarian, and less dogmatic in their beliefs (Dorsey, 1994; Goldstein, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Smith, Locke, & Fenster, 1970). Scott (1986) found that degreed individuals were better communicators than people without degrees. Ferrell (1994) reported that educated officers were more positive about community policing than less educated officers. Taken together, these studies show that the ability to think independently, a larger knowledge base, lower levels of dogmatism, and increased self confidence are qualities enhanced by a college education. Also, Cascio (1972) discovered that people with college degrees, in general, are more intelligent and more motivated in comparison to non-degreed individuals. In addition, Lefkowitz (1977) discovered that college educated individuals were not only superior performers

but also had more potential to experience greater job satisfaction and be more likely to achieve self actualization than less educated people.

If research is correct in identifying which traits are developed by a college education, then individuals with baccalaureate degrees will, in most cases, possess Goldstein's five essential characteristics of police officers. With this in mind, college educated police officers should experience greater job performance than non-college educated law enforcers, but research in this area is inconclusive because of the inconsistency of the results obtained through experimentation.

COLLEGE EDUCATION'S EFFECTS ON POLICE PERFORMANCE

Numerous studies have addressed the question of whether a college degree is significantly related to police performance. For example,

Roberg (1978) and Madden (1990) found that college educated officers performed better than non-college educated officers.

Cascio (1977) found that higher educated police officers were rated higher and had fewer injuries than their less educated counterparts.

Lester (1979) reported that education was positively related to academy graduation.

Matyas (1980) found a negative correlation between education and discipline problems.

Champion (1994) reported significant positive correlations between education and academy performance, patrol performance, and critical thinking ability.

Interestingly, Cascio (1972) and Griffin (1980) found that education has its greatest effect on performance after officers gain more experience. Gottlieb and Baker's research (1974) has shown otherwise.

Much research supports the need for higher education, but there is also conflicting evidence. According to Miller and Fry (1978), police officers experience no direct benefits from possessing a college degree. Also, degreed police officers respond to situations differently than non-degreed police officers, but there is little or no agreement about whose response characteristics are superior (Finkenauer, 1975). After reading the literature, it is clear that the results of studies done on police performance are inconsistent. This inconsistency is what stands in the way of imposing police education requirements. The present research attempts to achieve the consistency that is necessary to make conclusive statements about the effects of education on police performance.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

If a bachelor's degree becomes a prerequisite for becoming a police officer, adverse impact will surely result. Police departments must be prepared to prove that the education requirement is job related. Although there have been judicial cases dealing with educational prerequisites, there are no precedents for requiring a bachelor's degree.

There have been cases upholding varying degrees of education as valid requirements for employment as a police officer. In the case *League of United Latin American Citizens v. Santa Ana*, the court ruled that Santa Ana, California's requirement of a high school diploma or an equivalency diploma was reasonable prerequisite for employment as a police officer. Additionally, in the cases of *United States v. Buffalo* and *Morrow v. Diolard*, the courts claimed that a high school diploma is the absolute minimum amount of education a police officer should possess to be eligible for employment. Lastly, in a case dealing with college education as a requirement, the U.S. Court of Appeals upheld the Dallas Police Department's prerequisite of 45 hours of college level courses with at least a "C" average (*Davis v. Dallas*). These cases serve as precedents showing that varying amounts of educational requirements will prove in court to be job related. According to Carter and Sapp (1992), a college degree requirement could be upheld in court as long as the policy is properly defined and explained. Even though the courts might view an educational requirement as being job related, the police departments still must address the issue of adverse impact. So

in effect, police departments must make efforts to recruit individuals who are underrepresented on the police force.

HYPOTHESES

Taking the previous work of others into consideration, the consensus is that police officers possessing college degrees will outperform police officers with less education. In addition, experience coupled with education will further enhance police performance. This belief is the possible cause of the inconsistent findings of past research.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant relationship between education level and police performance. Higgins and Michals (1994) found no overall significant correlation between education and overall performance. However, their results suggested that education does not affect overall police performance until police officers gain several years of experience.

Hypothesis 2: A college degreed police officer's performance will increase with experience. This performance increase for college degreed individuals will occur while the less educated police officers' performance remains stagnant over the course of their careers.

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 299 police officers working in small to medium size cities located in Virginia. Table 1 displays the education levels and ages of the sample. Females account for 3.9% of the subjects. The average age of the sample is 36.3, with a range from 24 to 63 years of age. The sample's average level of experience is 10.8 years, with a range from 1 to 40 years.

Table 1. Subjects' levels of education and experience.

	<u>Number of subjects</u>	<u>Percentage of subjects</u>
<u>Education Level</u>		
High School Diploma	111	37.1
Some College	86	28.8
Associate's Degree	48	16.1
>Two years of college	10	3.3
Bachelor's Degree	38	12.7
Graduate School	6	2.0
<u>Years of Experience</u>		
1	16	5.4
2	27	5.7
3	18	6.0
4	22	7.4
5	17	5.7
6-9	58	19.4
10-14	60	20.0
15-19	50	16.7
20-40	41	13.7

Procedure

We mailed letters to 40 police chiefs asking them to indicate the level of education and performance for each of their officers in accordance with the survey previously described. Of the 40 surveys mailed, 12 were completed and returned. The survey asked supervisors to evaluate their officers' overall performance, communication skills, public relations skills, report writing skills, response to new training, decision-making ability, and commitment to the police department. The supervisors rated each officer with respect to these dimensions on an ascending five point scale, with one being below average and five being above average.

We included the number of accidents and number of times the officer required discipline. We rated these two facets of performance as the actual number of incidents. In addition, we instructed the supervisors to rate the officer's overall performance during their past year of work. Lastly, the supervisors who completed the survey supplied the following information on themselves; education level, years of experience, and gender.

RESULTS

Due to small sample sizes in some of the educational groups, we grouped subjects who had attended graduate school with the individuals possessing bachelor's degrees, and subjects with more than two years of college with the individuals who had obtained associate's degrees. In order to observe the effects of experience, we placed subjects with five or more years of experience in the high experience group, and subjects with four or less years of experience in the low experience category.

As shown in Table 2, there were significant correlations between education and most measures of performance. Importantly, results show a significant correlation of .24 between overall performance and education. The only variables not proving to be significantly related to education were objective measures of the volume of arrests, number of times the officer required discipline, and number of accidents. These results clearly support Hypothesis 1.

Table 2. Correlations between education and experience and performance.

<u>Performance Dimension</u>	<u>Education</u>	<u>Experience</u>
Communication Skills	.35***	-.023
Public Relations Skills	.22***	.02
Report Writing Skills	.25***	-.10
Response to New Training	.29***	-.09
Decision Making Ability	.20***	.12
Volume of Arrests	.03	-.16**
Level of Commitment	.17**	-.04
Overall Performance	.24***	-.02
Number of Times Requiring Discipline	-.01	.13*
Number of Accidents	.08	-.02

* p<.05
 ** p<.01
 ***p<.001

We performed an analysis of variance to investigate the interaction of education and experience. In further support of Hypothesis 1, we observed a main effect of education on overall performance (F [3,290]

= 6.46, $p < .0003$). There was no main effect observed for experience ($F [1,290] = .08; < .78$). As shown in Table 3, we found a significant interaction between education and experience for overall performance ($F [3,290] = 4.71, p < .003$). This interaction supports Hypothesis 2.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for overall performance ratings by education and experience.

<u>Level of Education</u>	<u>Years of Experience</u>	
	<u>1-4</u>	<u>5 or more</u>
High School Diploma	3.48 ^a (.63) n=31	3.16 ^b (.72) n=80
Some College	3.25 ^a (.84) n=28	3.45 ^a (.71) n=58
Associate's Degree	3.81 ^{ac} (.40) n=16	3.49 ^a (.78) n=42
Bachelor's Degree	3.40 ^a (.63) n=15	3.97 ^c (.87) n=29

Means sharing the same superscript are not significantly different.
Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Finally, it was also believed that the supervisors' education levels might affect how they rated the performance of police officers with respect to their own varying levels of education. This interaction was not significant ($F [3,291] = 1.13, p < .34$).

DISCUSSION

The previously stated results show strong support for both hypotheses. According to this study, police officers who possess college degrees are better performers than those with only high school degrees. In addition, increased communication skills, public relations skills, report writing skills, response to new training, decision-making ability, and commitment are all significantly correlated with higher levels of education. The only facets that were not related to education were volume of arrests, number of times the officer requires discipline, and number of accidents. The fact that volume of arrests does not correlate with education is not surprising given the nature of the task. Police officers' arrest counts depend on such factors as the area the officer patrols and the ability to solve problems without arresting individuals. A possible explanation for number of accidents and number of times the officer requires discipline not correlating with education is that accidents are inevitable and mistakes will be made regardless of education.

Also demonstrated by this research is that officers who hold a college degree are clearly the best performers, but it takes several years for the degreed officers to distinguish themselves as superior officers. In fact, there are no significant differences in performance among police officers with varying amounts of education and limited experience. This study shows that college educated police officers improve their performance as they acquire more experience. This effect is not found for the lesser-educated officers. It is possible that this finding occurs because, as police officers become more experienced and receive promotions, their work becomes more complex, and a college education helps officers understand the more complicated work.

An alternative or complementary explanation is that college degreed police officers retain more of the skills they developed through not only their college education but also their police academy training. In effect, it is possible that high school does an inadequate job of teaching individuals to retain the necessary information to be successful at their respective careers. Additionally, it takes several years of on-the-job police experience for the benefits of a college education to become apparent. Even though these explanations are broad, this research concludes that college-education police officers improve with time, while the less educated digress from their original levels of performance.

Another concern was the possibility that the education level of the evaluating supervisors might have an effect on how positively or negatively they rated the police officers with regard to their education level. The research shows that concern is not a factor in the interpretation of these results.

This research demonstrates that a college education requirement for police departments is beneficial to the level of performance achieved by its police officers. These results corroborate previous research findings that a college education is related to job performance of police officers. Although this study does agree with some of the previous research, consistent replication of this type of study is needed to conclude hypotheses concerning college degree requirements for police officers. In addition, research should be conducted to achieve a valid explanation as to why education interacts with experience to influence performance.

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