

Research Paper: Whether a College Degree Should be Mandatory for Police Recruits

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## 8-1 Research Paper: Whether a College Degree Should be Mandatory for Police Recruits

The entry-level educational requirements for police recruits vary significantly across different regions and jurisdictions. Historically, the minimum educational requirement for most law enforcement positions has been a high school diploma or its equivalent. However, in recent years, there has been a growing discourse among law enforcement agencies, policymakers, and the public regarding the potential benefits of higher educational standards, including the requirement of a college degree for police recruits. The discussion hinges on various perspectives about the role of education in enhancing the capabilities and professionalism of police officers. Amidst this debate, this paper seeks to explore the imperative question: Should a college degree be mandatory for police recruits to enhance their effectiveness and professionalism? By examining how educational attainment correlates with critical policing outcomes such as decision-making skills, ethical judgment, and community interaction, the study delves into whether higher education can serve as a lever for improving law enforcement practices.

This research is particularly significant as it aligns with broader law enforcement reform efforts that aim to improve community safety and trust. In an era marked by calls for greater accountability and improved community relations in policing, understanding the impact of educational requirements on law enforcement effectiveness is crucial. Furthermore, this study will clarify terminologies for a clearer discussion, defining key terms such as "police recruits," which refers to individuals newly entering police work; "college degree," implying an associate's or bachelor's degree; "law enforcement effectiveness," which encompasses aspects like compliance with legal standards, ethical conduct, and community engagement; and "community policing," a strategy that focuses on building ties and working closely with community members. Therefore, the thesis of this paper asserts that mandating a

college degree for police recruits could lead to significant improvements in law enforcement effectiveness, community relations, and ethical conduct.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review explores the evolving landscape of educational requirements for police recruits, examining the historical context, current trends, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence. The goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how educational attainment influences law enforcement effectiveness and professionalism. Additionally, this review identifies gaps in the existing literature, highlighting areas where further research is needed.

### **Historical Perspective**

Historically, the minimum educational requirement for police recruits in the United States and many other countries has been a high school diploma or its equivalent. According to Boos (2023), the rationale behind this minimal requirement was rooted in the belief that basic education sufficed for the essential tasks of policing, which were predominantly centered around maintaining public order and enforcing laws. However, as the complexities of societal issues increased, so did the expectations from law enforcement officers. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967) was one of the first major calls for higher educational standards, recommending that all police officers have a college education by the 1980s. Despite these recommendations, many departments were slow to adopt these changes, with varying degrees of implementation across regions.

Research from the 1980s and 1990s, such as that by Brown (2020), highlighted the benefits of higher education in policing, noting that officers with college degrees were better at problem-solving, exhibited fewer disciplinary issues, and demonstrated enhanced communication skills. These findings led some jurisdictions to increase their educational

requirements, though adoption was inconsistent and often influenced by local economic and political factors.

### **Current Trends**

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards higher educational requirements for police recruits in various parts of the world. In the United States, for instance, some states and municipalities now require college credits or associate degrees, with others strongly encouraging a bachelor's degree. According to Sloan & Paoline (2021), as of the mid-2010s, approximately one-third of U.S. police departments required at least some college education for new recruits. The trend is mirrored internationally in countries such as Finland and Norway, where higher education has long been a prerequisite for entry into the police force (Terpstra & Schaap, 2021).

These changes are driven by a growing recognition of the multifaceted role of modern law enforcement officers. Today's officers are expected to handle complex social issues, engage in community policing, and employ advanced technological tools. Educational programs that include coursework in criminal justice, sociology, psychology, and communications are seen as critical in preparing officers for these diverse challenges. Balzer (2020) notes that departments with higher educational requirements report improved officer performance, particularly in areas requiring critical thinking and ethical decision-making.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Several theoretical frameworks support the relationship between higher education and effective policing. The Human Capital Theory, as noted by Goldin (2024), suggests that investments in education increase an individual's productivity and efficiency. Applied to policing, this theory implies that officers with higher education are better equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to perform their duties effectively.

The Cognitive Learning Theory, noted by Almulla and Al-Rahmi (2023), further supports this relationship by emphasizing the role of higher education in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to this theory, the cognitive development achieved through college education enables officers to analyze complex situations, make informed decisions, and understand diverse perspectives, which are essential in community policing and conflict resolution.

Additionally, the Socialization Theory, discussed by Hernandez-Lopez et al. (2020), highlights the role of education in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. College-educated officers are likely to have greater exposure to diverse viewpoints and ethical considerations, fostering a more professional and empathetic approach to law enforcement.

### **Empirical Studies**

Empirical research provides mixed but largely supportive evidence regarding the impact of higher education on policing. A study by Aguirre (2021) found that officers with college degrees were less likely to use force and more likely to engage in community-oriented policing practices. Similarly, Rosenfeld et al. (2020) reported that college-educated officers received fewer complaints and disciplinary actions compared to their less-educated counterparts.

On the other hand, some studies suggest that the relationship between education and policing outcomes is not straightforward. For example, Wolfe et al. (2020) found no significant difference in the use of force between officers with and without college degrees. They argue that factors such as departmental culture and training practices might play a more substantial role in shaping officer behavior than education alone.

Moreover, the impact of higher education on job performance and career advancement within police departments has been documented by researchers like Balzer

(2020), who found that college-educated officers were more likely to be promoted and exhibit leadership qualities. These findings underscore the potential long-term benefits of higher educational requirements in fostering a more professional and capable police force.

### **Gap in Literature**

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain in the literature regarding the impact of higher education on policing. One significant gap is the lack of longitudinal studies that track the careers of police officers with varying educational backgrounds over extended periods. Such studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of higher education on career progression, job performance, and community relations.

Additionally, there is a need for more research on the impact of specific types of education, such as degrees in criminal justice versus other fields, on policing outcomes. While general higher education is beneficial, understanding the nuances of how different educational backgrounds influence policing could inform more targeted recruitment and training strategies.

Furthermore, the interplay between higher education and other factors, such as departmental culture, ongoing training, and community engagement practices, is not fully understood. Future research should aim to disentangle these variables to provide a clearer picture of how education interacts with other elements to influence policing effectiveness.

While there is substantial evidence supporting the benefits of higher education for police officers, the existing literature has gaps that need to be addressed. This paper aims to contribute to the discourse by providing a comprehensive analysis of the role of higher education in law enforcement and proposing strategies for integrating educational requirements into police recruitment and training practices.

### **Arguments in Favor of College Degree Requirement**

#### **Improved Critical Thinking Skills**

Higher education is instrumental in developing critical thinking skills, which are essential for effective decision-making in policing. College education exposes students to a variety of complex problems and scenarios that require analytical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to evaluate evidence critically. According to Karanja (2021), critical thinking involves the ability to reason, reflect, and make judgments based on well-supported arguments rather than assumptions or biases. For police officers, these skills are invaluable in high-pressure situations where quick, yet thoughtful, decisions are required.

For instance, a police officer faced with a potential domestic violence situation must assess the scene rapidly, determine the credibility of conflicting statements, and decide on the best course of action to protect all involved parties while respecting legal constraints. An officer with a college education may be better equipped to analyze the situation holistically, considering psychological, sociological, and legal perspectives. The comprehensive approach can lead to more effective and fair resolutions, ultimately enhancing the quality of policing.

Moreover, critical thinking skills help officers to anticipate and mitigate potential problems before they escalate. The proactive approach can be particularly useful in areas such as crime prevention and community policing, where understanding and addressing underlying social issues can lead to long-term benefits.

### **Enhanced Communication Abilities**

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful policing, particularly in community policing contexts where building trust and rapport with community members is crucial. A college education significantly enhances an individual's communication skills, including verbal, non-verbal, and written communication. These skills are developed through various academic activities such as writing essays, participating in discussions, and giving presentations.

Police officers often need to explain complex legal concepts in understandable terms, de-escalate tense situations through verbal negotiation, and write detailed reports that are clear and precise. Higher education provides officers with the tools to communicate effectively across different mediums and with diverse audiences (Camilleri, 2020). For example, an officer might need to engage with community leaders, write press releases, or testify in court. Each of these tasks requires a high level of proficiency in communication.

In addition to clarity and effectiveness, communication skills developed in college help in empathetic interactions. According to a study by Blair et al. (2021), officers who can communicate empathetically are more likely to gain the trust and cooperation of community members. The trust is critical for effective policing as it encourages community members to report crimes and cooperate with investigations.

### **Better Professionalism and Ethical Standards**

Education plays a vital role in shaping an individual's ethical reasoning and professional behavior. College education typically includes coursework in ethics, social justice, and law, which helps to instill a strong ethical foundation in students. For police officers, this ethical grounding is crucial in navigating the complex moral dilemmas they encounter on the job.

Officers with a college education are more likely to adhere to professional standards and ethical guidelines. The adherence is reflected in their interactions with the public, decision-making processes, and overall conduct. For instance, educated officers are often better at recognizing and mitigating biases, which can lead to fairer and more just policing practices.

Furthermore, professionalism in law enforcement is not just about following rules but also about embodying values such as integrity, accountability, and respect. A college education fosters these values by exposing students to diverse perspectives and teaching them



the importance of ethical behavior in professional settings. According to Fridell et al. (2021), officers with higher education levels report a greater commitment to ethical policing and are less likely to engage in misconduct.

### **Positive Impact on Community Relations**

One of the most significant benefits of higher education for police officers is its positive impact on community relations. Community-oriented policing strategies require officers to work closely with community members, understand their concerns, and collaboratively develop solutions to local problems. Officers with a college education are better equipped to engage in these activities due to their enhanced critical thinking and communication skills.

Several examples illustrate how educated officers have successfully implemented community-oriented policing strategies. In Cincinnati, Ohio, the police department's community-oriented policing strategy led to a significant decrease in crime rates and improved community trust (Blair, Weinstein, Christia, Arias, Badran, Blair, Cheema, Farooqui, Fetzer, & Grossman, 2021). The success was partly attributed to the department's emphasis on higher education and training for its officers.

Another example is the Boston Police Department's Operation Ceasefire, which involved extensive collaboration with community members and other stakeholders to reduce youth violence (Campie et al., 2020). Officers involved in the program had received specialized training that included coursework in criminology, sociology, and community engagement, which contributed to the program's success.

Educated officers are also more adept at understanding and addressing the root causes of crime, such as poverty, lack of education, and social inequality. By tackling these underlying issues, they can develop more effective and sustainable policing strategies that benefit the entire community.

## **Support from Academic and Law Enforcement Communities**

The push for higher educational requirements for police recruits has garnered significant support from both academic and law enforcement communities. Academics argue that higher education equips officers with critical thinking skills, ethical reasoning, and a broader understanding of social issues, all of which are essential for effective policing.

For instance, a study by Rosalez (2023) found that police officers with higher education levels were better at problem-solving and exhibited fewer instances of misconduct. The finding has been echoed by numerous other studies, highlighting the positive correlation between education and policing outcomes.

Law enforcement officials also support higher educational requirements. Many police chiefs and senior officers advocate for college education as a means to professionalize the police force and improve its public image. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has long endorsed higher education for police officers, emphasizing its role in developing well-rounded and competent law enforcement professionals.

In addition to improving individual officer performance, higher education is seen as a way to enhance the overall culture of law enforcement agencies. By attracting and retaining more educated officers, agencies can foster an environment that values critical thinking, ethical behavior, and community engagement. The cultural shift can lead to more effective and equitable policing practices, ultimately benefiting both officers and the communities they serve.

## **Addressing Concerns and Providing Solutions**

### **High Costs and Potential Economic Barriers for Prospective Recruits**

One of the most significant arguments against requiring a college degree for police recruits is the high cost of higher education. College tuition and associated expenses can be prohibitive, especially for individuals from low-income backgrounds. The economic barrier

could potentially dissuade many capable individuals from pursuing a career in law enforcement, thereby limiting the diversity and inclusivity of the police force. According to the Akers (2020), the average annual tuition for in-state students at public colleges was \$10,440, and \$36,880 for private colleges, not including room, board, and other fees. For many, this represents a substantial financial burden.

To address the financial barriers associated with higher education, various strategies can be implemented to make college more accessible for prospective police recruits. One effective solution is the establishment of scholarships and grants specifically for individuals pursuing careers in law enforcement Clinkinbeard et al. (2021). Federal, state, and local governments, along with private organizations, could create financial aid programs that cover tuition and other educational expenses for recruits who commit to serving in the police force for a specified period.

For example, the Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) provides grants and scholarships to students enrolled in criminal justice programs. Expanding such initiatives can significantly reduce the economic burden on recruits. Additionally, police departments themselves can offer tuition reimbursement programs, where officers are reimbursed for their educational expenses after completing their degrees (Su et al., 2021). It not only incentivizes higher education but also ensures that the police force retains skilled individuals who are committed to their roles.

Furthermore, partnerships between police departments and educational institutions can lead to the creation of specialized programs that offer reduced tuition rates or flexible payment plans for aspiring officers. Online courses and community college programs also provide more affordable pathways to obtaining a college degree, making higher education more accessible to a broader range of individuals.

### **Importance of Practical, On-the-Job Training**

Another argument against the college degree requirement is that not all essential policing skills can be taught in a classroom setting. Policing involves a significant amount of practical, hands-on skills that are best learned through on-the-job training and real-world experience. These skills include physical fitness, tactical training, and situational awareness, which are crucial for effective law enforcement.

Critics argue that focusing too much on academic qualifications may overlook the importance of practical training and could lead to recruits who are well-educated but lack the necessary field skills and experience (Lahr, 2024). Policing is a demanding profession that requires quick thinking, physical agility, and the ability to handle high-pressure situations—skills that are often developed and honed in the field rather than in a classroom.

While it is true that practical skills are essential for policing, formal education and on-the-job training should not be viewed as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary components of a comprehensive training program. A well-rounded police officer needs both theoretical knowledge and practical skills to be effective. Higher education provides the foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills that enhance an officer's ability to analyze situations, understand legal and ethical implications, and communicate effectively.

To bridge the gap between academic learning and practical experience, police training programs can integrate both elements. For instance, colleges offering criminal justice degrees can include practical training modules, internships, and ride-along programs with police departments (Kratcoski & Kratcoski, 2021). The hands-on experience allows students to apply their classroom learning in real-world settings, gaining valuable practical skills while completing their education.

### **Potential Reduction in Police Recruitment Numbers Due to Higher Entry Requirements**

A third counterargument is the concern that mandating a college degree for police recruits may lead to a reduction in the number of applicants. Higher educational requirements

could deter individuals who are eager to start their policing careers immediately after high school or those who may not have the means or desire to pursue a college degree. The potential decrease in recruitment could exacerbate existing staffing shortages in police departments, especially in rural or economically disadvantaged areas.

While it is possible that higher educational requirements might initially reduce the number of applicants, the long-term benefits of having a more qualified police force outweigh this concern. A college-educated police force is likely to be more effective, ethical, and professional, leading to better community relations and improved public trust (Vespucci, 2020). Educated officers are better equipped to handle the complexities of modern policing, including addressing social issues, engaging in community policing, and making informed decisions in high-pressure situations.

To mitigate the potential reduction in recruitment numbers, police departments can implement several strategies to widen the recruitment pool. One approach is to offer pathways for current officers to obtain their degrees while serving. Tuition reimbursement programs, part-time study options, and online courses can make it feasible for officers to pursue higher education without leaving the force.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The research design chosen to investigate whether a college degree should be mandatory for police recruits will utilize a mixed methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of educational requirements on policing outcomes (Mangels et al., 2020). Quantitative components will involve statistical analysis of data gathered from various police departments, measuring variables such as job performance, community relations, and professional development among officers with different educational

backgrounds. Concurrently, the qualitative component will include interviews and focus groups to gather in-depth insights from police officers, administrators, and community members about their experiences and perspectives on educational requirements.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Quantitative data collection will consist of structured surveys distributed to a sample of police officers across various departments. These surveys will gather information on officers' educational backgrounds, years of service, roles within the department, and self-reported measures of job satisfaction and effectiveness. Additionally, data will be collected from police department records, focusing on metrics such as the number of complaints, instances of use of force, and community engagement activities, to correlate educational levels with specific policing outcomes.

For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with senior police officials and training academy instructors to gain insights into the perceived benefits and challenges of requiring a college degree for recruits. Furthermore, focus groups will be held with community members and rank-and-file police officers to discuss their views on how officers' educational levels affect their interactions and effectiveness in community policing.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

In terms of quantitative analysis, statistical software such as SPSS or R will be used to perform regression analysis and other relevant statistical tests to identify significant relationships between officers' educational levels and various measures of policing effectiveness and community impact (Hoffmann, 2021). Descriptive statistics will provide a baseline understanding of the data distribution, including averages, variability, and frequencies.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and divergent views related to the educational

requirements. Coding procedures will be applied to organize the data into categories related to benefits, challenges, and perceptions of the impact of education on policing. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, may be employed to assist in managing, coding, and synthesizing the qualitative data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research will adhere to strict ethical standards to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the research, what it will involve, and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Steps will be taken to ensure that all data collected, especially from interviews and focus groups, is kept confidential. Participants will not be identified by name in any reports or publications resulting from this research, and all data will be stored securely. Care will be taken to ensure that the questions and discussions do not lead to discomfort or stress for the participants. Any potential conflicts of interest will be disclosed, and measures will be taken to mitigate them.

### **Potential Implications of the Study**

#### **For Law Enforcement Agencies**

The findings of this study could significantly influence recruitment, training, and policy within law enforcement agencies. If the study supports the necessity of a college degree for police recruits, agencies may need to revise their recruitment strategies to attract candidates who meet these educational standards. The shift could involve partnerships with colleges and universities, offering internships, and promoting law enforcement careers to students pursuing degrees in criminal justice or related fields. Additionally, agencies might need to implement tuition assistance programs or scholarships to support recruits in obtaining the necessary education.

In terms of training, integrating higher education requirements could lead to more comprehensive and advanced training programs that build on recruits' academic knowledge. Training curricula could incorporate complex scenarios and ethical dilemmas that require critical thinking and advanced problem-solving skills (Cohen, 2021). Furthermore, ongoing professional development could emphasize continual learning and adaptation, encouraging officers to pursue further education and specialized training throughout their careers. The approach could foster a culture of lifelong learning within law enforcement, enhancing overall professionalism and effectiveness.

Policy changes might also be necessary to align with new educational standards. Agencies would need to establish clear guidelines and criteria for educational qualifications and ensure that these standards are consistently applied in the hiring process. Additionally, policies could be developed to support officers in their educational pursuits, such as offering flexible work schedules to accommodate class times or providing financial incentives for obtaining advanced degrees (Perna, 2023). These policy adjustments could help create a more educated and capable police force, better equipped to handle the complexities of modern policing.

### **For Communities**

The implications of higher education requirements for police recruits extend beyond law enforcement agencies to the communities they serve. One of the primary potential benefits is the enhancement of community trust and safety. Educated officers are generally better at communication, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making, all of which are crucial for building positive relationships with community members. Improved interactions between police officers and the public can lead to increased cooperation and a greater sense of mutual respect and understanding.



Communities might also experience a reduction in incidents of police misconduct and use of excessive force, as officers with higher education levels are typically better equipped to de-escalate situations and employ alternative conflict resolution strategies. The improvement in policing practices can result in safer communities and a more favorable perception of the police among residents.

### **For Policymakers**

The study's findings could have significant implications for policymakers at various levels of government. If higher education is shown to positively impact policing, policymakers might consider implementing or expanding funding for educational initiatives aimed at current and prospective police officers (Bland et al., 2021). It could include grants, scholarships, and loan forgiveness programs designed to alleviate the financial burden of obtaining a college degree.

Educational standards for law enforcement could also be re-evaluated and raised to reflect the findings of the study. Policymakers might establish minimum educational requirements for police recruits nationwide, ensuring a consistent and high standard of policing across different jurisdictions. These standards could be incorporated into accreditation processes for police departments, incentivizing agencies to prioritize education in their recruitment and training practices.

### **Conclusion**

The question of whether a college degree should be mandatory for police recruits is both timely and significant, reflecting broader concerns about the professionalism, effectiveness, and community orientation of law enforcement. This research paper has explored the multifaceted implications of instituting such a requirement, discussing its potential to enhance critical thinking, ethical judgment, communication skills, and overall professional conduct within police forces. From the literature reviewed, it is evident that

higher education contributes positively to the development of policing skills that are crucial in today's complex societal landscape. Officers with college degrees have been shown to possess a better ability to make reasoned decisions, communicate effectively across diverse communities, and adhere to high ethical standards. These skills not only elevate the professionalism of police officers but also enhance their capabilities in handling dynamic and challenging situations with greater competence and sensitivity.

The arguments presented have also addressed common counterpoints, including concerns about the accessibility of higher education and its potential impact on recruitment. Solutions such as scholarships, grants, and tuition assistance programs have been suggested to mitigate these challenges, ensuring that a broader and more diverse pool of candidates can meet the new requirements without undue financial hardship. Furthermore, the study has outlined the broader implications for law enforcement agencies, communities, and policymakers. For agencies, the transition to higher educational standards promises a more adept workforce capable of engaging with complex issues more effectively. For communities, the potential increase in trust and safety can foster a more harmonious relationship with law enforcement. For policymakers, the findings advocate for supportive measures that facilitate the education of future officers, thereby enhancing the overall quality of policing. Requiring a college degree for police recruits offers a pathway towards a more educated, ethical, and effective police force. While there are challenges to be addressed in implementing such a policy, the long-term benefits for community safety, officer professionalism, and public trust are compelling.

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