

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Public Perception of the Need for College Education for  
Entry Level Police Officers**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Public perception of the need for college education for entry level police officers is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because all departments must determine an appropriate level of education to meet the needs and expectations of citizens. The level determined by departments will impact citizens in one way or another. The purpose of this research is to survey a small, random sample of Dallas citizens to gauge their opinions and insights into the issue.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of books, articles, and statistical data. It also included personal contacts/interviews and a survey distributed to 51 survey participants. The researcher discovered that the survey participants perceived, by a slight margin, that college education is not necessary to perform entry level police work. The survey was given to a small, randomly selected group of Dallas citizens. Further research into the views of citizens regarding police officer education would yield additional insights to the issue.

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## INTRODUCTION

Proper education plays a vital role in the lives of law enforcement officers every day. College education is a type of education available to officers. Historically, people needed little or no formal education to gain employment as a police officer. The police profession, as did many professions and institutions, underwent reforms in the 1960s and 1970s to meet the demands of the changing public. One change that many police departments enacted was requiring at least some college education for entry level officers.

The purpose of this research is to gauge the public's opinion in today's environment regarding the necessity of college education prior to employment. There will be a primary question related to the research regarding whether or not a college education is necessary for entry level police officers. A review of literature will be conducted to gain a historical perspective of the issue. Key information about the research question will be obtained through questionnaires and personal contacts/interviews. The contacts will be conducted in a public setting.

This researcher anticipates that the public perceives that some college education is not needed to do entry level police work. This information could lead to qualifications a person should have that would substitute for or replace the college education requirement. The public may perceive that things like military service, a clean work history, or other life experiences may be suitable as a substitute. The public may also feel that rigorous academy and field training could compensate for a lack of college education.

This type of research could benefit police departments that are considering adding the college education requirement. It could also affect police departments that are considering eliminating the college education requirement. All departments could benefit if the public perceives that there is no significant difference between an officer with a high school diploma and one with some college education in terms of providing basic police services. A wider applicant pool could be created for qualified high school graduates. This could alleviate some of the issues associated with finding qualified college educated applicants. As a result, the public would have more access to qualified police officers that are ready and willing to serve their needs.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The goal of making police officers more professional began many decades ago. Steps toward that goal were small and measured and took place over many years. Usually, larger and progressive police departments led the way in upgrading the quality of police officers and the services they provided. Community policing and Compstat are examples of that today. Along the way, the concept of improving the education level of police officers became a focus. Most officers did not even have a high school education prior to the movement toward professionalism. They were ill-equipped to handle a rapidly changing society and the role they played in it.

College education later became a specific focus in the movement during the 1960s. The pros and cons of college education have been debated ever since. However, the relationship between college education and police work was solidified in 1967 when the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice and later, in 1973, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice

Standards and Goals supported the 4-year degree as a prerequisite for employment in law enforcement (Breci, 1994).

The number of officers nationwide obtaining at least some college education has increased greatly, and it has had an impact on law enforcement personnel. A 1998 national survey commissioned by the Police Executive Research Forum found that 44.7% of American police officers completed two or more years of college, a 30% increase from 14.6% of officers in 1970 (Breci, 1994).

The state of Minnesota, where it is mandatory for officers to have at least two years of college education, conducted a random survey in 1990 to determine officers' attitudes regarding higher education. The respondents most often gave the following benefits: Keeping officers current and well-rounded and helping them understand the public and communicate with them more effectively. Respondents also said that preparing officers for advancement and providing them with computer skills would be additional benefit (Breci,1994). However, only 24% supported a 4-year degree requirement for law enforcement officers. Several concerns were noted, one of which being that minority candidates could be prevented from entering the profession. Another concern was that a college graduate may be more inclined to question rather than accept. Furthermore, the risk of disqualifying candidates based on their economic situation or the possibility that a small town pay scale would be insufficient were cited as concerns (Breci,1994).

It has widely been considered that college education would enhance job performance and decrease negative factors like corruption. Truxillo (1998) conducted a 10-year study that investigated the relationship between education and law enforcement

job performance, which reflected previous findings. Some promotions resulted from having a bachelor's degree. One explanation for this connection could be that the desire for educational advancement is the same as that for professional advancement. Another possibility is that those with more education have obtained skills necessary for job promotion. A third possibility is that higher education incorporates the kind of professionalism and leadership needed for professional success (Truxillo, 1998).

The data regarding educational variables are not supportive of the concept for increasing educational requirements to reduce disciplinary problems. Education did not seem to have a connection with the level of disciplinary actions, a relevant aspect of law enforcement. Truxillo, 1998). It was suggested that other methods, like background investigations, may be better for predicting discipline issues.

In terms of learning, college educational enhancement is often in competition with police training or academy training. A degree from one university is equal to that of another university, regardless of the quality of the institutions. In contrast, professional development through additional training can have a large impact on someone's career in many agencies. The actual training of an officer begins at the lower level of skills and progresses despite the education he or she has obtained. Additionally, it is difficult to prove that education produces a person better suited to law enforcement. Higher education has tried to separate itself from the idea of job training; however, much police academy training is similar to some aspects of a liberal arts education. Many students are more suited to a career in academia after receiving higher education than they are to their chosen occupation (Buerger, 2004). College education and training now compete with experiential learning, such as life experiences and military service, as to

what constitutes real preparation for police work. An effective blend of all these approaches may be necessary to meet the challenges of changing technological and societal trends of the future. The blend could be similar to what medical, psychological, and social work communities already have.

It has consistently been pointed out by proponents of higher education for officers that many problems associated with police work could be resolved through attainment of higher education. Some of the benefits included more in-depth knowledge of various functions and standards as well as an enhanced understanding of their importance to society. Other benefits mentioned were alertness, empathy, flexibility, and intelligence as well as a greater range of interpersonal skills. Additionally, proponents of higher education for officers believe that this requirement could provide officers with greater analytical abilities, better decision making skills, and stronger morals (Carter, 1989). Others believe that problems confronting the police service have causes other than the education of police officers. According to Sherman (1978), the major problems “are caused more by the structure of our society and polity than they are by people who do police work” (p.18). While these underlying causes remain, a wide strategy that includes higher education for officers should be used to resolve problems.

Many people associated with law enforcement have a contrary point of view in terms of college education for police officers. Through the years, many individual concerns have been listed by researchers, administrators, and officers. Some of the concerns have become non-issues and have gone by the wayside with the passage of time. However, some concerns still remain in today’s environment. Primary among them are “The uncertainty in validating the requirement as a bona-fide occupational



qualification and the fear that many basic academy positions would not be filled” (Armstrong, 1998, p. 18). It is still being argued that a high school education is sufficient to handle the tasks like making arrests, writing tickets, and responding to calls that street patrol officers complete on a daily basis. Virtually all people see and understand the potential benefits of college education, and those with some concerns should not be considered against education. They merely note that some intangible qualities like integrity, courage, compassion, and a sense of humor, which are needed for the job, may not be obtained or enhanced by higher education. The potential effects or impact of a higher education requirement seem to be of more concern. Some of the concerns are “Degree requirements will negatively affect minority recruitment, [that] officers without college can develop necessary people skills through in-service training, [and that] police departments cannot competitively recruit college graduates” (Armstrong, 1998, p. 21). There is much data that suggests higher education has a positive impact on officers’ lives beyond street patrol experience (i.e. career advancement and promotions). Armstrong (1998) conducted an analysis of the effect of higher education on the career paths of Texas peace officers in 1998:

The data revealed that there is a differential distribution of personnel by education with the more educated respondents holding a higher rank category than those with lower educational levels. The data also showed that those respondents who had increased their level of education the most since their employment were more likely to hold command positions. Additionally, respondents were found to move through their career paths more quickly as their level of education rose. p. 95

Agencies can play a big role in the education process in this regard by continuing to offer incentives like extra pay and tuition reimbursement to police personnel. The data

may also inspire people to stay in school longer or obtain a degree prior to seeking employment.

Historically, many of the reform activities, including education programs and funding, were made possible by the availability of federal funds. The funds were first distributed from the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance, which was formed in 1965. In 1968, funding was created from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), created under the Omnibus Crime Act. However, in addition to the limited forms of training and education, the vast bulk of the resources were allocated to things like communications equipment, computers, vehicles, and specialized units (Goldstein, 1977).

Also, from a historical perspective, a few reformers doubted the wisdom of requiring a college degree of all recruits. Wilson (1970) based his objections on several grounds. Some of the objections may or may not apply today: "Police should be "reasonably representative" of the community, which was full of citizens who did not start or finish college. Police should serve as a "ladder" to middle class for blacks and other newcomers" (as cited in Fogelson, 1977, p.272). While he did encourage officers to attend college for all of the positive reasons, Wilson (1970) objected to making the college degree an entrance requirement. He believed that the law enforcement community had overly emphasized the formal credentials (as cited in Fogelson, 1977).

Public opinion polls have been used in the past to gauge a department's performance or to seek input from the citizens regarding potential change. Two examples are the Kansas City preventive patrol and the Washington D.C. women on patrol experiments. According to Milton (1978), a major purpose of both was to

determine the impact a change in police policy or service makes from the perspective of citizens:

Evaluations found that citizens were much more receptive and favorable to the concept of women on patrol than were most of the policemen. Often, changes are resisted more by police than by citizens. Although citizens would welcome a change, the idea either does not occur to the police or is rejected because the public would not like it. p. 441

Citizen polls can be an effective tool for police departments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The law enforcement community has debated the need for college education in police work for many years. Yet, the citizens that police officers serve have rarely been consulted about the topic. This issue will not be solved with this writing. However, its author will explore the attitudes and insights of randomly selected Dallas citizens concerning the need for college education to perform entry level police work. The research question to be examined considers whether or not the public perceives a need for college education for newly hired police officers. Citizens have a stake in the debate, for they will be impacted by whatever standards are selected by police administrators. The City of Dallas is home to over 1.2 million people. The city is divided into six geographical patrol divisions. These divisions serve diverse communities and a cross-section of the city's population. The author will attend a police sponsored event at each of the patrol divisions. The researcher hypothesizes that the public does not perceive a need for college education for entry level police work. The method of inquiry used by the researcher will include a review of books, articles, and statistical data. It also will include personal contacts/interviews and a survey distributed to 51 survey participants. Survey participants (8-10) will be randomly selected at each event. The writer concedes that

this is a study limitation and that more research is required before definitive conclusions can be reached regarding the topic.

Each citizen will receive a cover letter (Appendix A) and the survey (Appendix B). The surveys will be delivered in person to the citizens. Upon completion on site, the surveys will be returned to the writer. In the cover letter, the writer will identify himself as a law enforcement officer and participant in the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas's Leadership Command College. The cover letter will also provide information regarding the nature of the research being conducted. The response rate resulted in 100% return of the questionnaires.

Answers from the returned surveys will be tallied and broken down according to various categories including gender and ethnicity. Responses to open-ended questions will be categorized and logged into several response categories.

## **FINDINGS**

An attempt was made as part of the research to determine if a citizen's previous contact with Dallas police officers might affect their perception regarding educational requirements for the job. Of the 51 respondents to the survey, 27, or 53%, had been previously contacted by officers. When participants were asked about their prior contact with officers and about their educational level, 53% reported prior contact with officers. Of those, 55% thought college was necessary for officers, and 44% did not. Of those who had not had prior contact, 46% thought college was necessary and 54% did not. The survey revealed that of the 51 respondents, 24 stated that some college education was necessary for entry level police (patrol) work. The remainder of the 51 respondents (27) stated that college was not necessary.

**Table I.** Relationship between contact with officers and response

Prior contact with officer	27
College necessity: yes	15
College necessity: no	12

**Table II.** Relationship between no contact with officers and response

No prior contact with officer	24
College necessity: yes	11
College necessity: no	13

A person's age and life experiences may shape his or her opinion regarding the education level of officers. For example, some of the older respondents could recall the days when officers had no education or professional training. The ages and responses are listed below.

**Table III.** Comparison of respondents' ages and response

College necessity	Age				
	17 to 27	28 to 38	39 to 49	50 to 60	Over 61
Yes	5	5	2	3	9
No	4	8	6	3	6

The findings as well as gender and ethnic information are listed below. The author attempted to determine if there was a correlation between gender and ethnic background and perception of college education for officers. The tables below show the breakdown of respondents answers to a question about the necessity of college education for entry level police work.

**Table IV.** Comparison of respondents' genders and response

College necessity	Gender	
	Male	Female

Yes	10	14
No	11	16

**Table V.** Comparison of respondents' ethnicities and response

	Ethnicity			
	African-American	Hispanic	White	Asian
College necessity				
Yes	6	5	11	2
No	8	5	13	1

Respondents of both opinions listed qualifications that could be used in exchange for college education. The number represented for each of the following categories adds up to more than the 51 respondents because they were free to make more than one selection.

**Table VI.** Respondent's opinions of alternative qualifications

Military experience	27
Charitable/missionary/social work experience	14
Favorable employment history	19
Favorable high school record	14
Customer service experience	3
Previous law enforcement experience	7

Some respondents offered their opinion as to what personal characteristics a person should have in order to be hired as a police officer. Numerous suggestions were listed. However, the author has listed only the most suggested opinions.

**Table VII.** Respondent's opinions of personal characteristics

Honesty	12
Integrity	6
Fairness/open-mindedness	7
Respectfulness/courteousness	5

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The issue examined by the researcher considered the public perception of the need for college education for entry level officers. It was a pertinent issue to examine because many police departments, large and small, have struggled to determine the appropriate level of education to be hired as a police officer. Citizens are impacted by the decisions that police departments make. The research focused on the public's insights regarding educational levels needed for newly hired police officers.

The purpose of the research was to survey a small, random sample (51) of Dallas citizens to gauge their responses to the research question. People were asked whether or not they felt a college education was necessary for entry level police officers. The researcher hypothesized that the public perceived that college education is not needed to perform entry level police work. The researcher concluded from the findings that the surveys indicated, by a slight margin, that the public did not perceive a need for college education in entry level police officers. The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the values expressed by a small, randomly selected group of people.

Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because of the small limited number of participants in the survey. More research is required before definitive conclusions can be reached.

The study of the public perception of the need for college education for entry level police officers is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because all departments must determine an appropriate level of education for its officers to service and meet the expectations of citizens. All police departments could benefit from the

results of this research because a wider applicant pool could be created for high school graduates and that could alleviate some of the issues associated with competing with other police agencies and the private sector for qualified college educated applicants.



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## APPENDIX A

Dear Dallas Citizen:

I am Lieutenant Eric Webb of the Dallas Police Department and I am conducting a survey as part of a course of study for the Leadership Command College of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas. The subject matter of the survey involves college education as it relates to entry level police (patrol) work.

Many police agencies around the country are striving to determine what amount, if any, of college education is suitable to meet the minimum requirement to be hired as a police officer. Some agencies have increased their requirement up to and including a bachelor's degree. Other agencies have maintained their requirements if having some minimal amount of college credit hours, while other agencies have either decreased the college requirements or have dropped the college requirement altogether.

Your participation in this survey will provide data regarding the viewpoints of Dallas citizens concerning this issue. The responses you provide will be held in confidence. No identifying information regarding respondents will be maintained, and all questionnaires will be destroyed upon completion of the project. Your participation in the survey is strictly voluntary.

The questionnaire will only take a short time to complete. Should you feel uncomfortable with a specific question, please go to the next questions. Thank you for the insight and for participating in the survey.

Eric Webb  
LEMIT, LCC Participant

## APPENDIX B

### SURVEY of DALLAS CITIZENS' OPINIONS REGARDING the NECESSITY of COLLEGE EDUCATION to PERFORM ENTRY LEVEL POLICE (PATROL) WORK

Have you called for the Dallas Police or been contacted by Dallas officers conducting official business in the past?

Yes or No

What is your age?

- 17 to 27
- 28 to 38
- 39 to 49
- 50 to 60
- 61 +

In your opinion, is some college education necessary for entry level police (patrol) work?

Yes or No

Are you?

- 1. Male
- 2. Female

What is your race/ethnicity?

- 1. White
- 2. African-American
- 3. Asian
- 4. Hispanic
- 5. Native-American
- 6. Other (Indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

What are suitable qualifications that could be used in exchange for college education?

- 1. Military experience
- 2. Charitable/Missionary/Social Work experience
- 3. Favorable employment history
- 4. favorable high school record
- 5. Other qualifications or life experiences \_\_\_\_\_

In your opinion, what personal characteristics should an individual possess to be hired as a police officer? Please list.