

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Assessing the Need for a College Education Entry Level Requirement in the
Houston I.S.D. Police Department

A Policy Research Project
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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the history of law enforcement in general and the educational aspects of law enforcement in particular. The purpose is twofold: first to collect research in the field of education with emphasis on officers with college degrees and non-degreed officers, and second to study the recommendations of different police commissions and use these studies to determine if the Houston Independent School District Police Department should require a bachelor's degree as an entry level requirement. Most of the research favored the college educated officer; however, there are dissenting views. Those views are in the minority, but regardless of these deficiencies, higher education for police officers appears to be a current and continuing trend in police development.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to collect research in the field of educational policing with emphasis on officers with college degrees versus non-degreed officers. The problem or issue to be examined is whether or not officers with college degrees perform or are all around better officers than non-degreed officers. The research evaluated the feasibility of adopting an informal policy of requiring a bachelor's degree for entry level into the Houston ISD Police Department. The intended audience is the police chief of the Houston ISD Police Department and the school board of the Houston Independent School District. The sources of information were gathered from various academic journals and other publications. The intended outcome of the project is to use the information gathered in developing a policy for the department.

Historical Context

Historically, law enforcement officers have been selected for their ability to clean up small town lawlessness. The big gun and the ability to shoot the fastest was the way the sheriffs were appointed. According to legend, fledging towns and cities during the colonial period were assigned volunteer officers. A review of the early sheriff constable system noted the experience of patronage was the usual criteria for selection. However, the earliest force in police classroom training came from the International Association of Chiefs of Police. This organization was formed in 1891 as a clearinghouse for criminal records. Their services expanded into many areas, including police training. Although the International Association of Chiefs of Police was vocational in nature, it served as an underlying factor in the development of academic programs. This action drew attention to the need of formal preparation for police officers. The first formal training for police officers was established in 1905 by August Vollmer at Berkeley, California. Within the next few years, police departments in New York, Detroit, and Philadelphia followed. August Vollmer lead and established academic and training schools to prepare their police

officers in the 1920s. A group called the Institutional Association of Policemen (I.A.P.) was founded in 1915. They were encouraging the current policewomen and the women candidates to seek a college education. Their emphasis was oriented toward a liberal arts education with the postulate that such preparation would better assist them in police performance. During this time, most policewomen were assigned almost exclusively to juvenile units, women units and detention facilities. However, a new generation of police education was beginning in 1929. The University of Chicago developed the first university curriculum for police training in 1931 (Wickersham Commission 1931:82-83).

The National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, known as the Wickersham Commission, issued its fifteen-volume report on the state of law enforcement in America. In its report on the police, the Commission stated that the greatest promise for the future in policing is the college or university. The Commission spoke of the need for higher entrance standards, more professional law enforcement officers and ongoing training for police personnel. The recognition of the complexity of the police officer's job laid important groundwork for subsequent educational requirements. The report also recommended a college curriculum in police science that would lead to an associate's degree.

Beginning in the 1930s, the police experienced a significant influx of college graduates. This trend enhanced the quality of police departments. Unfortunately, the change was not the result of progressive police administration, but the impact of the Depression. It was difficult for college graduates to find employment so they turned to policing as a last resort (Goldstein 1977).

In America law enforcement has changed, especially in the way officers have been recruited and selected. In the late 1960s there was a flurry of activity related to higher education and law enforcement. The source of this activity came from many factors: changing social values, civil unrest and the police enforcement research. However, the

1931 National Commission on Law Enforcement Observance and Enforcement (The Wickersham Commission) was an important, although somewhat formless, national recognition of the need for increased educational standards for police officers. The Wickersham Commission spoke of the need for higher entrance standards and, also, the need for more “professional” law enforcement officers and ongoing training for police personnel. The Commission did not make college a prerequisite per se.

The 1967 President’s Commission on Law Enforcement Administration of Justice raised the issue again, this time with specific recommendations for increasing the educational level of the police. Also, in 1967, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1965 provided funding to facilitate achieving the Commission’s educational recommendations by establishing the Law Enforcement Educational Program (LEEP) which provided loans and grants for preservice and inservice. Upgrading police personnel by raising the educational levels of police officers has been and remains an integral element of police professionalism.

When the movement to educate police gained momentum in the 1960s and early 1970s, advocates’ arguments rested principally on intuitive propositions that connected college education to improved police performance. There was very little evidence to support these propositions because so few officers at that time had attended college (Carter 1989). Since that time, many propositions have been subjected to empirical scrutiny. The evidence is neither consistent or compelling. The purpose of this paper is twofold: one is weighing arguments and research others; the second purpose is to see if higher educational requirements would be feasible for the Houston Independent School District’s Police Department.

The arguments for and against measures intended to raise the educational levels of police officers have been advanced on several fronts. Advocates of higher education for police maintain that higher educational requirements will improve the quality of police. The

proponents feel that there would be a noticeable change in the attitudes of officers reflected in their communication skills, and their value system would be heightened according to this view. College educated officers are more likely to appreciate the role of police in a democratic society. The officers would probably demonstrate more tolerance when dealing with citizens of different ethnic, religious, and police backgrounds (Brown 1974).

Advocate support for the arguments of those who oppose educational requirements for police reports that education bears a negative and statistically significant relationship to job satisfaction. Beginning in the 1930s, the police departments experienced a gain in the number of college graduates, the influence of which began to alter the quality of police.

Unfortunately, this change was not the result of progressive police administration, but the impact of the Depression wherein many college graduates could find no other employment and turned to policing largely as a last resort (Goldstein 1977). A similar phenomena also occurred after World War II when a large number of returning veterans, many with a college education, flooded the civilian job market; a job market which had actually declined because of decreased production after the war was over. Once again, many degree-holding officers were forced into a law enforcement career. After the war, educational levels for the police and the number of upper level institutions offering law enforcement programs steadily increased. During this period, few revelations in police education occurred; however, this was to change in 1967 (Goldstein 1977).

The decade of the 1960s saw turmoil and change in American society. Factors such as the youth rebellion which changed attitudes toward the use of drugs, assassinations, the Viet Nam conflict, new directions in civil rights, mass rioting in our cities, and a liberal supreme court had an effect on the criminal justice system. A combination of these factors and a rising crime rate prompted two significant events: first was the issuance of a series of reports by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of

Justice in February, 1967. Second was the passage by Congress of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1965.

The President's Commission expressed an impending need for police officers with academic experience. According to the Task Force Report, their position postulated that police personnel with two or four years of college education should have a better appreciation of people with different racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Studies support the proposition that well-educated persons are less prejudiced toward minority groups than the poorly educated (Challenge of Crime in a Free Society 1967). The Commission also expressed a belief that the university-prepared officers would be more capable of rational, intelligent decision making and would be more judicious in fulfilling the multivariate function of the police role. This position led to the Commission's recommendation that the ultimate aim of all police departments should be that all personnel with general enforcement powers have bachelor's degrees (Challenge of Crime in a Free Society 1967).

Review of Literature or Practice

Review of the early sheriff constable system noted the experience of patronage was the usual criteria for selection. However, the beginning of formal police training and education are discussed in reference to the work of August Vollmer, a marshal in the 1930s in Berkeley, California. Since the 1960s, the issue of higher education in law enforcement has been generally debated by law enforcement theorists and practitioners. The activity was due to many factors changing social values (Fogelson 1977).

Should police officers at entry level be required to have a college degree? This question has been hotly debated for many years. The 1931 National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (The Wickersham Commission) was an important, although somewhat amorphous, national recognition of the need for increased education standards for police officers. Those who are in favor echo the same feeling. However, police

agencies are reluctant to commit their belief because of litigation as in the Davis-Dallas case.

Some of the benefits expressed are:

- Greater knowledge of procedures, functions, and principles relevant to the officer's present and future assignment;
- Better appreciation of their professional role and its importance in the criminal justice system as well as our society;
- More desirable psychological mastery which includes such qualities as alertness, empathy, flexibility, initiative, and intelligence;
- Greater range of interpersonal skills centered on their ability to communicate, to be responsive to others, and to exercise benevolent leadership;
- Greater ability to analyze situations, to exercise discretion, independence, and to make judicious decisions;
- Strong moral character which reflects a sense of consciousness and the qualities of honesty, reliability and tolerance.
- More desirable system of personal values consistent with the police function in a democratic society (Sterling 1974).

Others in favor of higher education emphasize the need for communication skills and the ability to express oneself effectively. Even at the most fundamental level of police command tasks and report writing, the skills obtained through college study can add a significant dimension.

Other opponents feel that college educated officers:

1. Receive fewer citizen complaints;
2. Show more initiative in performing police tasks;
3. Are more professional;
4. Use discretion more wisely;
5. Are more likely to be promoted;
6. Are better decision makers;
7. Show more sensitivity to racial and ethnic groups;
8. Have fewer disciplinary problems;
9. Those who are against higher education cite losing officers to other professions;
10. Question orders of those they feel are less educated;
11. Request reassignment to the most prestigious job (Carter 1989).

The debate goes on; however, many police agencies have adopted some kind of educational policy. Research stated that reasons why agencies do not establish a formal education requirement for employment include:

1. The perceived discriminatory effect of the higher education requirement and the fear of a discrimination suit;

2. Establishing the educational requirement requires validation and agencies are unsure how to validate higher education as a bona fide occupational qualification (BFQQ);
3. Fear that some good police candidates may be lost as a result of the requirement;
4. Fear by agencies and parent jurisdictions that police officer associations may seek increases in salaries and benefit if a higher education requirement is established;
5. Within higher education requirements, there must be more aggressive as well as expensive recruitment efforts;
6. The difficulty of change from the status quo (Carter 1990).

Negative effects of higher education on law enforcement:

1. Many good officers do not have degrees;
2. Many poor officers do not have degrees;
3. Degree requirements will negatively affect minority recruitment;
4. Degreed officers will be bored with the job.
5. Degreed officers will expect special treatment;
6. Most officers who attended college did so for the LEEP or GI benefits;
7. College educated officers cause animosity within the rank;
8. Officers without college can obtain necessary people skills through in-service and/or the job training.
9. Police departments cannot competitively recruit college graduates (O'Rourke 1971).

Discussion of Relevant Issues

All of the concerns focus on two main issues. There are good officers without degrees and poor officers with them (O'Rourke 1971). However, researchers have concluded that the college educated officers outweigh the non-college educated counterpart, such as positive relationships between higher education and fewer citizen complaints, few disciplinary actions against officers and few allegations of excessive force.

Those of us who believe that higher education has a positive effect on policy support the idea. However, it is realistic to understand that education is not the only answer. It is my view that a college education is an important tool that will facilitate the revolutionary policy problems and provide important skills for improving police service. Just as any profession such as teaching, mechanics, and the likes, I am an advocate of higher education for law enforcement officers because I see the need and advantages for a

little more knowledge. All the surveys the researchers have published guarantee that college educated officers will be better. However, I feel most would agree that education can't hurt; therefore, why not?

Many studies have been conducted concerning college educated officers vs. non-college educated officers. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, followed by the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1965, concluded the same recommendation that police educational standards be raised with the ultimate goal of requiring a baccalaureate degree as a minimum standard for employment. As a result of the concern, an increase on educational related issues such as officer performance, officer attitude, discretion, decision making, professional identity, and authoritarianism caused increased research, suggesting that higher education provided a number of benefits for law enforcement. The research revealed that a college education achieved the following: (1) developed a broader base of information for decision making; (2) engendered the ability to handle difficult or ambiguous situations with greater creativity or innovation; (3) enabled officers to cope better with stress-related problems and, thereby, to be more stable and more reliable employees; and (4) tended to make officers less authoritarian and less cynical with respect to the milieu of policing, thus enabling the officer to accept and adapt to organizational change more readily. The college educated officer's marriage, according to Niederhoffer and Blumberg, has three variables which must be kept in perspective when debating any aspect of the issue. First, higher education has traditionally been the one institution to which society has turned for assistance in the solution of its major problem, since crime has developed as one of the most serious problems perceived by the community (Wilson 1977). It was thus only reasonable that input from academia would be sought, and secondly, the involvement of higher education in the field of human problem solving in its infancy. Most of the problems academia has traditionally approached have been in the physical sciences or that of basic research.

However, application of the scientific approach to social problems has become much more utilitarian with the increased concern of crime. Thirdly, the involvement of higher education with criminal justice to any insignificant degree is a post-1960 phenomenon, as previously pointed out. This is a consequence of available funding, national commission reports, and the maturation of these variables, increasing the interaction of higher education and criminal justice.

To be truly effective in law enforcement, the police officer should have an understanding of how his/her role interrelates with others working in criminal justice. It is equally important that the police officer have a realistic understanding of how society perceives him/her and what it expects of him/her according to Lynch (1976). Higher education can help a person look at alternatives, examine the solutions of others, pose the choice more clearly, and critically discuss courses of action within this same frame of reference.

There are some disagreements about college educated officers being better or more proficient. Although this view represents a minority position, there are, nevertheless, reasonable reservations worthy of reflection. Some studies, although contradictory, have value; a dilemma of higher educational requirements frequently cited was originally expressed by the President's Commission itself. The Commission (1967) observed that raising educational standards may interfere with the concrete and immediate benefit of being able to add an adequate number of officers with minority backgrounds. Wilson (1977) contended that a blissful ignorance prevailed on many supporters of the college educated police officer. Especially, he notes, that while college may make a man/woman civil, it gives or reinforces for him/her his/her sense of duty. Wilson also believes that college trained officers were excessively aggressive and arrest-prone when a gentler hand might have been better.

Other criticism presented by Wilson seems to be much more practical. For example, he stated that college men/women may not be able to identify easily with or understand the problems of lower and working class persons with whom much of police contact consists. Wilson presumes that a police career is routine, sometimes dull, frequently unpleasant, and occasionally dangerous. Other research has indicated that a college level education may not be retained over time and that the value and personalities of the recipients may not be significantly altered by the college experience.

The role of law enforcement is still subject to conjecture; however, I feel the positive outweighs the negative. The purpose of this research was to gather information concerning college educated vs. non-college educated officers looking at the pros and cons, and evaluating the feasibility of the studies to incorporate them into a policy for the Houston I.S.D. Police Department.

The key points to remember in this entire research project is that law enforcement is essential to the survival of this society. The way we combat crime with efficiency and speed will determine our future. Currently, crime is rampant and out of control. Sophisticated, innovative methods with highly trained educated law enforcement officers is the only solution. Uniformity is essential in both hiring and the sentencing of criminals. It is ludicrous to have highly trained officers in one state and the sister state operating with antiquated methods in both hiring and incarceration procedures.

The education of evidence collectors and investigators is a very critical factor in improving the quality of crime fighting. It is therefore gratifying that colleges and universities are emerging as centers of education for law enforcement personnel. Criminal justice or law enforcement programs offer themselves as viable forums for teaching the philosophy and theory of criminal investigation. However, academia must strive to supplement, not supplant, police in-service training.

To summarize, academia, the public and law enforcement agencies must begin to see an officer of the law; as just old black-and-white movies. The only way to achieve this new image is to uniformly recruit and hire college educated officers.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The debate continues regarding college educated officers versus non-degreed officers. It is reasonable to conclude that different commissions and law enforcement programs have helped to influence the strides and gains on upgrading the standards. Unfortunately, many administrators still resist, for reasons I believe, are deeply rooted in the perception that tough, brave, hard working individuals are all that are necessary to become a police officer.

We are entering the twenty-first century; law enforcement and especially criminals have drastically changed. Technology in computers, polygraphs, fingerprinting and DNA testing requires highly trained technicians.

In the arena of criminal justice, laws are continually being broadened and revised to counter the alarming increase in crime rates. In response to public concern, law enforcement agencies have expanded their investigative functions. They are hoping to stem the tide of crime. We are conscious of the fact that criminals are becoming more and more sophisticated; therefore, officers must advance themselves.

The wave of the future must be the implementation of innovative programming. The number of college-educated officers can be increased through the implementation of innovative personnel management programs.

As a result of this conclusion, I recommend the following:

One New York City police department established a cadet program whereas college students are employed by the department on a non-sworn capacity and are required to attend college full-time. Tulsa, Oklahoma and Sacramento, California also have innovative programs to increase the number of college educated applicants. Both Tulsa and

Sacramento have a college requirement. Also, both employ community service officers. The community service officers perform support tasks such as working in a security position in jails. In addition, the community service officer attends college with expenses paid for by the police department. Growing pains are always painful; however, changes are important and inevitable.

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