

# FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin

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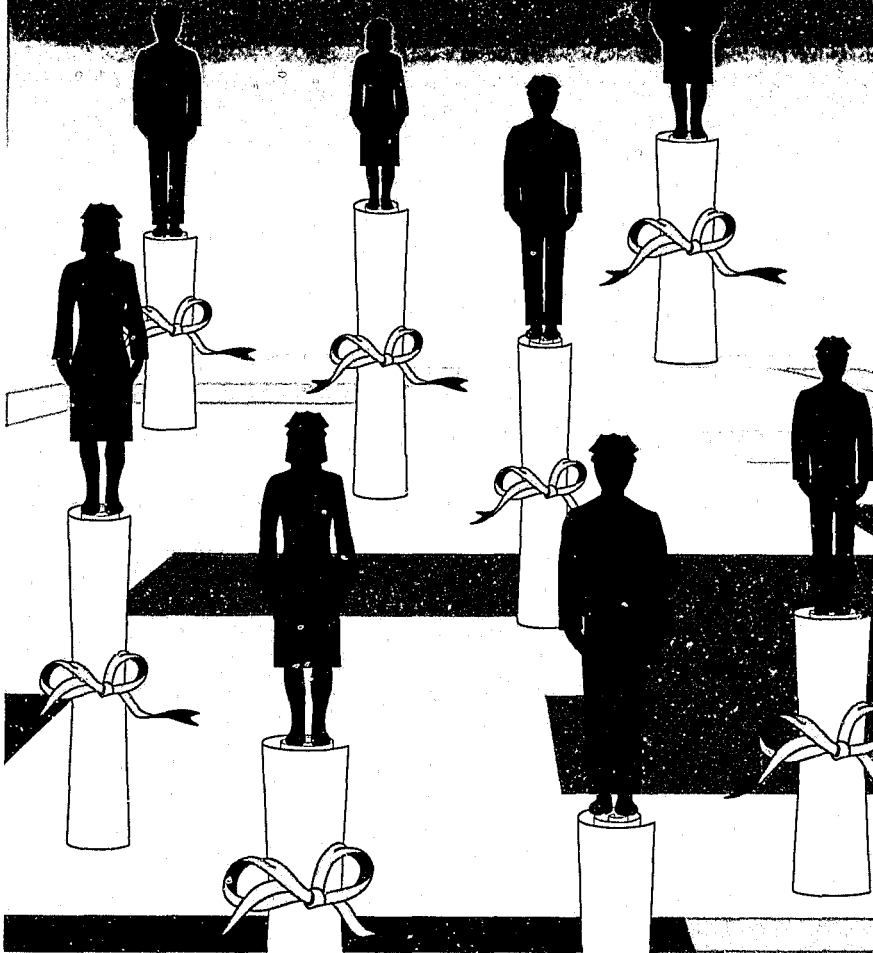
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NCJRS

# Higher Education and Ethical Policing

By  
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**I**n March 1991, the now famous Rodney King videotape was first broadcast to television viewers across the Nation and around the world. Suddenly, police

ethics were being discussed in editorials, news programs, and on radio and television talk shows. However, concern about ethical police behavior predated this blinding media

spotlight by many years. In fact, since the introduction of organized law enforcement agencies, communities and departments have agonized over the sometimes unethical decisions made by individual officers that resulted in criminal acts, decreasing departmental morale, and increased public dissatisfaction.

This article presents a brief overview of the prevailing beliefs among researchers concerning the effects of higher education on ethical policing and explains how these beliefs developed. In addition, the article discusses the results of two recent studies of Florida police officers that measure the relationship between higher education and the ethical behavior expected of law enforcement officers.

## ETHICS IN POLICING

The nature of policing dictates that officers must consistently make immediate and demanding decisions. These decisions call into play ethical and moral, as well as procedural and legal, questions and are most often made without recourse to specific directions from superiors or specific policy directives.

Another factor that forces officers to make difficult decisions is the changing role of law enforcement in today's society. As William Scott noted in his article on college education requirements for police officers, the role of officers is changing "... from pure enforcement of the law to one of dealing with people and their problems. Police...are taking a more holistic approach to the community."<sup>1</sup> This social work/community problem-solving approach creates even more demands on officers, as such a tech-

nique often requires them to choose between criminal justice or community service solutions. These decisions may be made with reference to policy, ethical standards, or on the basis of expediency, among other factors.

A further, but often overlooked, reason for ethics education is the myth of full enforcement. In *Police Training for Tough Calls: Discretionary Situations*, Frank Vandall argues that most formal police training relies on the principles of full enforcement. Practitioners, of course, are aware that full enforcement is impossible, impractical, and undesirable. Consequently, officers often make enforcement decisions with little formal guidance from their training or their departments.

According to Vandall, one result of this is inadequate recruit training in applied ethics. He states, "Since the task of the officer is thought to be simply to arrest when there is a violation, little attempt is made in training to distinguish similar calls or to give examples of how a particular law or department rule (if any) might be applied in different situations."<sup>2</sup>

In practice, enforcement policy is generally determined by the lowest ranks, i.e., patrol officers who interact with the public. In many cases, the decision for arrest is based solely on their discretion.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, much police training and education fails to deal with the concept of discretion in law enforcement.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Benefits of Higher Education**

Higher education has been cited as an advantage and even a cure-all

since at least 1917,<sup>5</sup> and numerous studies have called for college education for police personnel.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, many police administrators meet such proposals with less than whole-hearted enthusiasm.

This could rest in the fact that many police supervisors do not believe that college education produces better officers.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a field survey of police administrators and supervisors in Florida revealed that many administrators believe that much of the research undertaken at universities is purely theoretical and unsupported by real life experience.<sup>8</sup>

This belief, however, seems contrary to the findings of other surveys gauging the relationship between higher education and policing. In M.S. Meagher's 1983 study of 183 officers at one agency, the frequency of occurrence of specific positive acts was statistically different when controlled for higher edu-

cation. Meagher did not claim that higher education was the sole cause, but the study showed a clear relationship between higher education and the performance of desirable police tasks, such as the ability to communicate, the capacity to evaluate personal characteristics of others, and the ability to analyze and synthesize data logically.<sup>9</sup> All these are important factors in making ethical decisions.

David Murrell's 1982 doctoral dissertation took as its working hypothesis the assertion that an educated officer would be a better officer.<sup>10</sup> To test this hypothesis, he compiled a list of measurable factors that constituted good police work and compared the performance of educated and noneducated officers in two departments. The results conformed closely with his expectations. He concluded, "... college education makes for superior police work performance..."<sup>11</sup>



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In a 1988 study of the Los Angeles Police Department, Hooper concluded that there were "no appreciable differences across educational levels in the performance of police duties [but] generally, educational level accounts for some difference in proficiency of police tasks."<sup>12</sup> Among the specific revelations of this study was the finding

#### A Moral Code

To educate police officers adequately in the ethical sense, they must be encouraged to create a "moral code."<sup>16</sup> It is this internalized code to which officers turn when decisions must be made without recourse to specific direction from superiors or policy, and such occasions are frequent in police work.

practices to encourage higher education, most police officers in this country have not completed a higher education degree. In Florida, for example, only about 35 percent of the State's police officers have earned a college degree.<sup>19</sup>

Most officers still must complete an academy curriculum that bears little similarity to higher education. For instance, in Florida, police officer candidates must complete a 520-hour, rigidly defined curriculum at a designated police academy. This curriculum includes no "humanities" or general education courses, and only a 1-hour class on ethics.

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***...research seems to indicate that there is a positive correlation between higher education, fewer disciplinary actions, and fewer citizen complaints.***

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#### FLORIDA STUDIES

that officers who have completed 2 years of college are less likely to be accused of misconduct.<sup>13</sup>

A New York City-Rand Institute Study of the NYPD concluded that "... college educated officers in New York performed at a level well above average."<sup>14</sup> The study also found that more educated officers were "... less likely to incur civilian complaints."<sup>15</sup>

Although such research is helpful in pointing out relationships between education and performance, it rarely focuses directly on ethics. Often, however, the subject is examined through such measures as disciplinary records and civilian complaints. Although studies are not unanimous on the subject, research seems to indicate that there is a positive correlation between higher education, fewer disciplinary actions, and fewer citizen complaints.

Traditionally throughout American history, a liberal education has been viewed as the means by which citizens are grounded in the principles of an ethical, educated life. It is the liberal education portion of the college curriculum that is expected to lay the basis for cultural literacy and to provide the foundation for cultural values.<sup>17</sup>

One characteristic of general education, as opposed to career training, is the emphasis general education puts on the ethical and aesthetic development of the individual. As may be expected, there is evidence that such an education does positively affect student values.<sup>18</sup> In short, a liberal education helps to define and foster an individual's moral code.

#### CURRENT STANDARDS

In spite of government incentives and increasing departmental

In an effort to expand the data relating ethical policing to higher education, the authors initiated two research studies of Florida police officers. The first study concentrated on forced choice scenarios; the other centered on decertification proceedings by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

#### Study One: Forced Choice Scenarios

This study required respondents to choose between various responses to three different scenarios that posed ethical dilemmas. Fifty active duty police officers from two departments and 60 control subjects (persons who were not sworn officers) were given forced choices, ranging from ethically sound, to unethical, to outright illegal.

The results indicated that educational levels had a direct positive effect upon *all* individuals surveyed—those with more advanced

education were more likely to make ethically sound choices. However, for police officers, the correlation between a college degree and ethical decisions was 12 times greater than for the control group.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of this study is not that the attitudes described will accurately predict behavior, but that at least under scrutiny, educated police officers choose ethically better answers. They may or may not act according to those answers in real-life situations, but they have demonstrated that they know the morally acceptable behaviors and will choose them in a controlled study situation. That is less true of the officers who have not completed a college degree program.

### Study Two: Examination of Decertifications

The second study examined 1987-1988 data concerning the statistical relationship between probable cause for decertification hearings by the FDLE and educational levels of officers. The FDLE, through the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission (CJSTC), holds probable cause hearings to determine if an officer's certification should be suspended for a specific period of time or revoked.

The 1987 statistics revealed that officers who had not attained a 2-year college degree were roughly four times more likely to be brought before the commission for illegal or unethical behavior. In 1988, FDLE figures indicated that 1 in 217 officers with less than an associate's degree was brought before the commission to face disciplinary action.

However, only 1 in 686 with an associate's degree was brought before the commission.

In 1989, the figures were quite similar. Sixty-five percent of all officers in the State had less than a 2-year degree; 35 percent had at least a 2-year degree. Yet, only 15 percent of the officers brought before the CJSTC for disciplinary hearings had a 2-year degree.

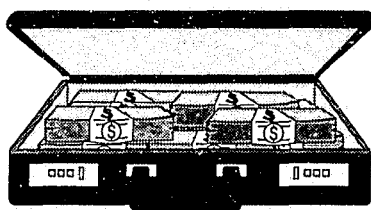
This research is preliminary. No effort has been made to control for age, length of service, type of degree, or other variables that other studies indicate might be significant. However, the research indicates that possession of a college degree acts as a predictor of behavior

in that those officers who have a degree are statistically less likely to be involved in the decertification process.

### RECOMMENDATION

The research available on the subject, though admittedly preliminary, appears to confirm the concept that better educated officers generally can be expected to perform in an ethically sound way. Therefore, it may be advisable to consider integrating the learning objectives of the police academy (currently required in at least 20 States)<sup>21</sup> into a 2-year college curriculum. The proposed curriculum would include task-specific skill courses for

#### Example of Forced Choice Scenario



**Y**ou are on assignment to the Drug Squad and are in the process of serving a search warrant on a suspected drug dealer's house. The suspect is handcuffed, sitting on the bed in the back bedroom, where you find a suitcase with what appears to be a

small amount of marijuana on top of several stacks of \$20 bills, which you approximate to total \$50,000. The suspect says, "That stuff was left here by a friend—forget the dope and I'll forget the money." No other detective is present or has seen the money. Your son, a leukemia victim, is in need of a bone marrow transplant that insurance will not cover.

#### Would you:

- 1) Arrest the suspect for possession of marijuana and bribery
- 2) Take the money and forget the marijuana, since its only marijuana and not cocaine or harder drugs
- 3) Take only that part of the money needed for the operation
- 4) Take part of the money and arrest the suspect anyway
- 5) Call your partner and ask his opinion

officers, such as traffic stops and defensive tactics, but would also require liberal arts courses.

For this proposal to become a reality, however, will require support not only from community leaders but also from law enforcement managers. To break from traditional training methods will result in resistance from some quarters, but police administrators should insist on the very best training, education, and preparation for their officers. Modern societal expectations demand that law enforcement officers have a broad-based education.

## CONCLUSION

The need for ethical officers is clear. The complexity of American society, the nature of police work, and the problems inherent in discretionary enforcement all require officers who are solidly grounded in applied ethics.

In all of the areas analyzed here—review of literature, scenario studies of sworn and nonsworn personnel, and examination of FDLE statistics on probable cause hearings—officers who had at least a 2-year college degree performed better than those who did not. There is no question that a behavior as complex as practicing ethical standards is influenced by many factors—education is but one among them. It does seem clear, however, that a positive correlation exists between college education, better police performance, and ethical police behavior.

Given the tremendous challenges facing law enforcement today and in the years to come, com-

munity and police administrators must consider any steps that could improve the capability of officers to ensure community safety. Research indicates that to promote ethical conduct, one step may be to integrate the traditional police academy curriculum with general college degree courses. ♦

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**In short, a liberal education helps to define and foster an individual's moral code.**  
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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> William Russell Scott, "College Education Requirements for Police Entry Level and Promotion: A Study," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 1986, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Frank J. Vandall, *Police Training for Tough Calls: Discretionary Situations* (Atlanta: Center for Research in Social Change, Emory University, 1976), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Culp Davis, *Police Discretion* (St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing Co., 1975), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Supra note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Goldstein, *Policing in a Free Society* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1977), 283.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Tyre and Susan Braunstein "Colleges May Provide Alternatives to Traditional Academies," *The Florida Police Chief*, Oct. 1989, 31 - 37; also Charles B. Saunders, Jr., *Upgrading the American Police: Education and Training for Better Law Enforcement* (Washington, D.C., 1970: The Brookings Institution), 112, 113; also Lawrence Sherman and the National Advisory Commission on Higher Education for Police Officers, *The Quality of Police Education: A Critical Review with Recommendations for Improving Programs in Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Dennis D. Powell, "An Assessment of Attitudes Toward Police Education Needs," *Journal of Police & Criminal Psychology*, March 1986, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell Tyre and Susan Braunstein, telephone and personal interviews conducted in Florida, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> William Russell Scott, "College Education Requirements for Police Entry Level and Promotion: A Study," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, March 1986, 4.

<sup>10</sup> David Murrell, *The Influence of Education in Police Work*, dissertation, Florida State University (1982).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Kent Hooper, *The Relationship of College Education to Police Officer Job Performance*, dissertation, University of Michigan (1988).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Cohen and Jan M. Chaiken, *Police Background Characteristics and Performance* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books D.C. Heath & Co., 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Callahan concludes that teaching students the necessary analytical and critical skills and encouraging them to create their own moral systems encourages the development of such systems. Daniel Callahan, "Goals in the Teaching of Ethics," in *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, ed. Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok (New York: Plenum Press, 1980), 61-80.

<sup>17</sup> Howard R. Bowen, *Investment in Learning: The Individual and Social Value of Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977).

<sup>18</sup> Eric Donald Hirsh, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Florida Department of Law Enforcement/DOE Criminal Justice Training Grant Task Force Seminar (May 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Study developed and administered by Susan Braunstein and Mitchell Tyre. Questionnaires administered to sworn officers of the Stuart, Florida, and Port St. Lucie, Florida, Police Departments and college students matched for age at Barry University and the College of Boca Raton, Florida, 1990. Authors assisted in statistical analysis by Robert Foresman, Florida Institute of Technology.

<sup>21</sup> Supra note 19.