

# **The Impact of Higher Education on Police Officer Attitudes Towards Abuse of Authority**

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## **Background:**

Scholars have examined the impact that education has on police attitudes and performance for nearly 100 years. Empirical research on the impact of education, however, has been limited and weak methodologically. One area particularly relevant area for the study of the impact of postsecondary education is police abuse of authority. If a college education makes officers more receptive to serving the community, more ethical and moral, and more tolerant, as predicted by some scholars, then college-educated officers would be expected to be less supportive of the abuse of police authority. This study examines the relationship between police officer higher education and abuse of authority attitudes.

## **Data and Methods:**

The data were drawn from a 1998 nationally representative sample of 925 police officers. The dependent variable is a scale combining answers to nine questions regarding an officer's beliefs on police use of authority. Three questions assess an officer's beliefs regarding how much force is acceptable. Two questions ask about an officer's beliefs regarding department rules and following the rules. Two questions ask officers about their level of agreement with the police code of silence. Finally, two questions asked officers to express their opinion about how outsiders view police brutality. The main independent variable of interest is whether the officer had received at least a bachelor's degree. The education variable was analyzed in three different ways: officers who had received a bachelor's degree prior to hiring were compared to all others, then officer who received a bachelor's degree at any point were compared to all others, and finally officers who had received a bachelor's degree, associate's degree, or any postsecondary education (but not a degree) were compared to those with just a high school diploma. A variety of individual and departmental-level control variables were also included.

## **Findings:**

Officers with a pre-service bachelor's degree held attitudes that were less supportive of abuse of authority. These effects remained regardless of when officers received their degree and across varying levels of higher education (i.e. associate's degree, attending some college). Officers with a bachelor degree had significantly more desirable attitudes across all three methods of measurement. The magnitude of this difference was particularly sizable when officers with a bachelor's degree were compared to officers with just a high school diploma.

## **Conclusions and Implications:**

These findings suggest that higher education has a beneficial impact related to police officer abuse of authority attitudes. These findings are generalizable to the universe of U.S. police officers in local agencies. The results show fairly strong evidence that postsecondary education has a beneficial impact on abuse of authority attitudes compared to just a high school diploma. This is significant because the majority of police departments still require just a high school education. Even if departments decide not to require higher education, these results indicate that recruiting the well-educated may be advantageous.