

Do cops need college?

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A new study suggests college-educated cops are dissatisfied with the job, have negative views of their supervisors and don't necessarily favor community policing, a strategy aimed partly at reducing the number of deadly police-citizen incidents dominating the headlines.

But William Terrill, a Michigan State University criminologist and co-author of the study on police attitudes, said the findings tell only part of the story. In past research on police behavior, Terrill found college-educated officers are less likely to use force on citizens.

As more officers enter the field with a degree, Terrill's research - the most comprehensive to date - is starting to paint a broader picture of the effects of higher education on policing.

"Our latest results on police views might lead one to question whether a college education is beneficial for officers," said Terrill, professor in MSU's School of Criminal Justice. "But our research is a mixed bag, and you have to take into account the behavioral effect as well. If you use less force on individuals, your police department is going to be viewed as more legitimate and trustworthy and you're not going to have all the protests we're having across the country."

High-profile police incidents have sparked protests from Los Angeles to Miami. The incidents include the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen, in Ferguson, Missouri, and the case of Eric Garner, who died after being put in a chokehold by police in New York. Grand juries failed to indict the officers involved in both incidents.

In the latest study, which appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, Terrill and fellow researchers analyzed survey data from 2,109 [police officers](#) in seven mid-sized to large police departments across the United States.

While none of the departments required a four-year degree, 45 percent of the officers in the study had a degree anyway. Half of the officers had majored in criminal justice; the rest had degrees in disciplines ranging from psychology to business. Interestingly, the type of degree did not affect officers' negative views on job satisfaction or their supervisors.

Terrill said the job dissatisfaction might stem partly from the fact that college-educated officers who join the force wanting to make a genuine difference in society are instead met with the reality of patrolling high-crime areas at night.

"We're throwing the least experienced officers into the most difficult situations simply because of their lack of seniority," he said. "It's like taking someone right out of medical school and asking them to perform heart surgery."

Further, college graduates are used to solving problems and debating issues, and might not like the old school, by-the-book mentality of many police administrators. "For those departments that hire college grads," Terrill said, "I think you have to be more open-minded as a [police](#) administrator and understand who it is you're bringing in."

Today's policing, he said, "is much more about social work than it is law enforcement. It's about resolving low-level disputes, dealing with loiterers and so on." Officers with experience in psychology, sociology and other college-taught disciplines might be more adept at addressing these issues.

While criminal justice remains a hot major, Terrill said many degree-granting programs - particularly online programs - are technical in nature and don't foster the analytical skills found in the social sciences.

"There are a lot of so-called 'cop shops' out there that aren't that very academically rigorous," he said.

His future research will investigate [criminal justice](#) curriculum at colleges and universities.

Provided by Michigan State University

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