

College-educated cops enforce the law more aggressively

November 26 2018, by Richard Wright, Richard Rosenfeld And Thaddeus L. Johnson



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In the wake of controversial and widely publicized incidents involving the use of deadly force by the police against racial and ethnic minorities, President Obama appointed the [President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing](#) in 2015 to propose ways to improve policing in the U.S.

One of the task force's many recommendations called for efforts to encourage [higher education for police officers](#). Underpinning this recommendation was an optimistic assumption that having a [college education](#) makes [police officers](#) more sensitive and responsive to the distinctive needs of the communities they serve. But is this true?

Despite the fact that the proportion of college-educated officers has risen [11-fold since 1960](#), researchers know surprisingly little about whether and how such officers differ from their less educated peers in their day-to-day encounters with citizens.

To find out, we collected data on more than 63,000 [traffic stops](#) made by 842 officers in St. Louis, Missouri during 2013 to see if those made by officers with a college degree – a little less than 30 percent of the total – differed significantly from those made by others. We chose traffic stops because they are the most [common point](#) of contact between police and citizens, and often have served as [flashpoints](#) for community unrest.

Officers with [college degrees](#) were significantly more likely to pull over drivers for less serious violations. For example, they were 50 percent more likely than officers without a college degree to stop drivers for a moving violation other than speeding, such as failure to signal when changing lanes. They were three times as likely to perform consent searches of drivers or their vehicles, and twice as likely to make arrests on discretionary grounds.

These findings are in line with a [study](#) of racial profiling in St. Louis in 2007. That study also found college-educated officers were more likely

than others to search the vehicles they pulled over.

Do such differences reflect attitudes that predate the officers' college degree or somehow were acquired during their pursuit of that degree? That cannot be determined from the data available to us.

Our preliminary interpretation is that having a college degree is a proxy for ambition, which expresses itself in the officers' routine enforcement practices.

College-educated officers may be more focused than their peers on achieving promotions and so are more closely attuned to the traditional reward structure of policing, which is based primarily on stops, finding contraband and arrests. A [study of American officers' promotional aspirations](#) shows that those with a bachelor's degree are almost twice as likely to covet promotion as officers with only a high school diploma.

Whatever the explanation, the fact that college-degreed officers appear to be more zealous than others in enforcing the law in traffic stops calls into question the effectiveness of simply hiring more of them as a way to improve police-community relations.

We are not suggesting that departments should avoid recruiting college-educated men and women. Far from it. A savvy reform-oriented [police](#) manager might be well-advised to capitalize on college-degreed officers' apparently greater ambition, using it as a vehicle for implementing change.

They could start by taking a page out of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department's book. The agency recently has introduced a scheme that expands the performance measures by which patrol officers are evaluated, requiring them to document their community engagement. So instead of being rewarded solely for enforcement activities, such as

number of arrests and traffic stops, officers are rewarded for activities such as attending neighborhood meetings or volunteering for a community organization.

Once that is done, our study suggests that [college](#)-educated officers will be first to recognize and adopt the new set of policy priorities.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: College-educated cops enforce the law more aggressively (2018, November 26)
retrieved 1 May 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2018-11-college-educated-cops-law-aggressively.html>

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