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Tradeoffs of Lowering Minimum Education Requirements for Police Staff

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As staffing challenges persist, police agencies are lowering minimum education requirements to increase applications. Yet, as this *PSO Perspective* discusses, doing so has important benefits and drawbacks for staffing, community relations, officer professionalism, and performance. In turn, agencies must take these trade-offs into account as they navigate potential workforce solutions.

A National Shift

As agencies continue to address recruitment challenges, many have reevaluated entry-level hiring standards to broaden applicant pools. In a [recent national survey](#) of police agencies conducted by PERF, the proportion of agencies requiring a bachelor's or associate's degree decreased from 2018 to 2022. In fact, some of the largest police agencies in the U.S. are following this shift, including the [New York](#), [Chicago](#), and [Dallas](#) Police Departments. Although this change may help alleviate persistent staffing difficulties, some evidence suggests that lower levels of education are associated with negative outcomes. As this Perspective discusses, agencies must carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of lowering education requirements across dimensions of staffing, officer performance, professionalism, community outcomes, and more.

Benefits

Reducing minimum education requirements offers several potential advantages for agencies and officers. The agency benefits may include:

- [An expanded applicant pool](#)
- [A potential increase in the number of diverse applicants](#)

- [Greater flexibility to prioritize relevant skills, experience, and personal attributes beyond education](#)

Compared with more educated officers, less educated officers tend to demonstrate:

- [Higher levels of job satisfaction](#)
- [Greater public service orientation](#)
- [More favorable attitudes toward top management](#)
- [Fewer discretionary searches](#)
- [A stronger expressed "calling" to police work](#)
- [A lower risk of cynicism](#)

Broadly speaking, those with lower levels of education tend to hold other valuable attributes and a more positive outlook toward police work than those with higher levels of education. Furthermore, the benefits also extend to workforce stability elements such as attraction to and satisfaction with the work.

Drawbacks

Research suggests that, compared to officers with higher levels of education, lower levels of education are associated with several consequential drawbacks, including:

- [A higher frequency of verbal and physical force in citizen encounters](#)

- [Higher levels of force use](#)
- [More support for abuse of authority](#)
- [A higher likelihood of receiving formal complaints](#)
- [Lower organizational commitment](#)
- [Lower quality of communication skills](#)
- [Weaker report writing skills](#)
- [Less receptive to new training](#)
- [Decreased decision-making ability](#)
- [Reduced exposure to different cultures and backgrounds.](#)

Concerns about reducing education requirements largely center on risks to officer professionalism, performance, public safety, community-police relations, and ethical conduct. Each of these is especially vital to consider as they could negatively impact perceptions of the police and, in turn, recruitment.

Practical Insights

Some agencies have seen vast increases in applications since lowering education requirements.

- The Philadelphia Police Department (PA) saw an increase from [2,000 to 5,700 applications](#) after removing the requirement that recruits have at least two years of college credit in 2016.
- Following the Chicago Police Department's (IL) new policy to waive college requirements in 2022, the agency received [400 applications](#) in a single day.
- The New Orleans Police Department (LA) removed its college education requirements and increased applications from [4,450 in 2016 to 7,440 in 2017.](#)

Despite reported increases in applicant pool size, for some agencies, [hiring seems to remain relatively static](#). This pattern may suggest that education requirements help filter through the applicant pool, which would be helpful for an agency where selection and processing are greater issues than recruitment and hiring. Furthermore, the removal of this requirement may be advancing individuals who are unable to meet other minimum eligibility requirements or pass other stages in the hiring process, such as interviews.

Conclusion

Given the current police staffing challenge, agencies are seeking various solutions to curb declining applicant numbers and stabilize the workforce. While lowering minimum education requirements may appear to offer an expedient solution to this challenge, it is not without meaningful trade-offs that warrant careful consideration. Agencies contemplating reducing or altogether removing college education requirements should give substantial weight to these potential consequences, perhaps considering a change in policy on a trial basis where implications can be assessed. Moreover, agencies that decide to proceed with these changes should implement strategies to mitigate any drawbacks.

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About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory

The [Police Staffing Observatory \(PSO\)](#) is a global collaborative of academics, scholars, practitioners, and students working with Michigan State University to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy, and operations. It aims to advance police workforce knowledge and its application through research and its dissemination, including practitioner partnerships.