

The Influence of Higher Education on Police Officer Work Habits

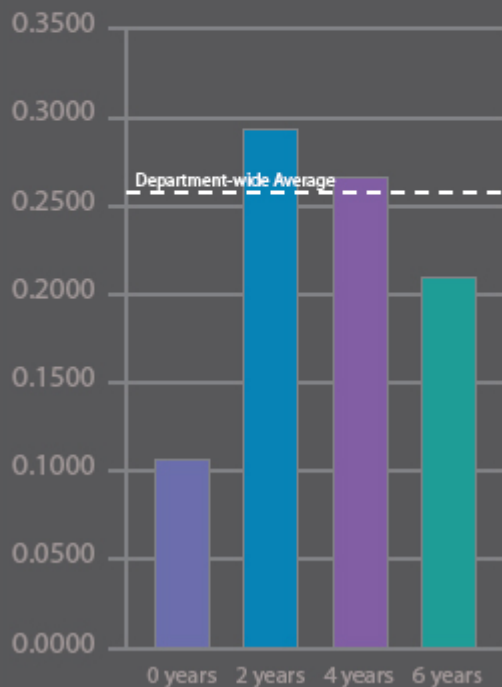
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A Study in Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Influence of Higher Education on Police Officer Work Habits

Figure 1

On-duty vehicle collisions per officer, September 1999–September 2002, by years of formal education beyond high school



Are street smarts better than book smarts? The question comes up often in policing and elsewhere. Television's *Apprentice*, featuring billionaire Donald Trump, recently pitted a street-smart team of successful businessmen and - women who did not have college degrees against a book-smart team of college graduates.

In law enforcement training there are still some instructors who criticize the recruitment of officers who have college degrees. This criticism comes in the form of teasing or sweeping statements regarding the importance of street smarts and common sense versus book smarts, and behavior and comments placing added value on street smarts. Similarly, when officers enter the field training program, they are often assigned to work with veteran officers who utter statements similar to "Forget about what you learned in the academy, kid. Things are different in real life."

With the help of the Saint Paul Police Department, the author conducted a study to determine whether the level of education of Saint Paul police officers is a good predictor of their work habits.

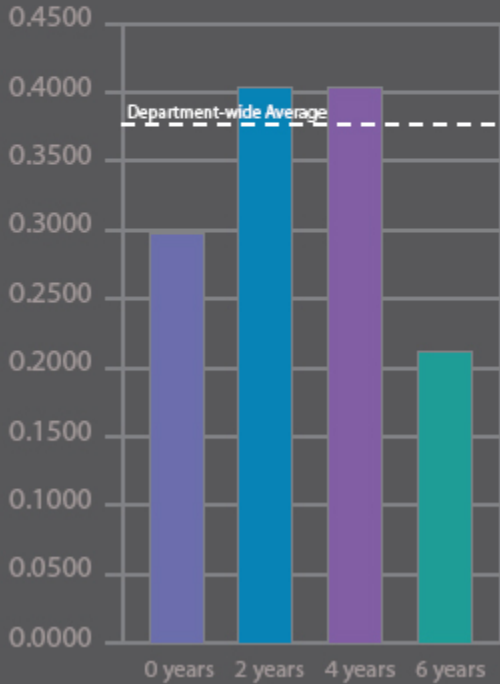
Some social scientists believe that a college education matters greatly and likely improves a police officer's effectiveness. But data supporting this proposition are difficult to find. This study was designed to determine whether there is any relationship between police officer work habits and higher education. The method involved examining the level of education of Saint Paul police officers and noting any correlations between it and the officers' work habits.

Police literature does describe links between education and law enforcement professionalism. The professionalization of police work and its connection to education was noted as early as the 1930s by August Vollmer and later by presidential commissions in the

1960s and 1970s. These recommendations resulted in many of the requirements established in today's state peace officers standards and training boards.¹ Starting in 1982, police officers in Minnesota were required to have a two-year college degree.

Figure 2

Disciplinary actions per officer, September 1999–September 2002, by years of formal education beyond high school



The presidential commissions concluded that law enforcement should become more like a profession, and one of the fundamental aspects of professional occupations was that they required education beyond high school. Their reasoning led the commissions to recommend that educational requirements for police officers be raised from a high school diploma to a college degree.² The overarching thought seemed to be that if law enforcement officers became more professional, then the unprofessional actions of law enforcement officers would be curtailed.³ This approach seemed reasonable; but the basis for the commissions' findings and recommendations was anecdotal stories and assumed correlations between education and improved police officer behavior.

Figure 3

Commendations per officer, September 1999–September 2002, by years of formal education beyond high school

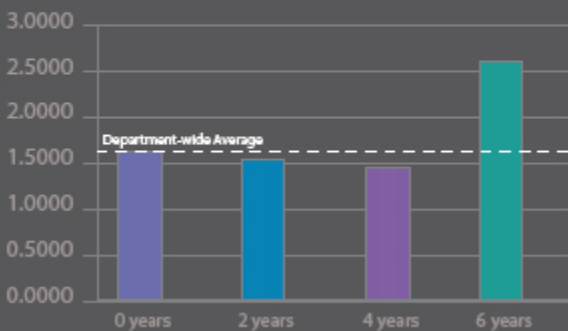
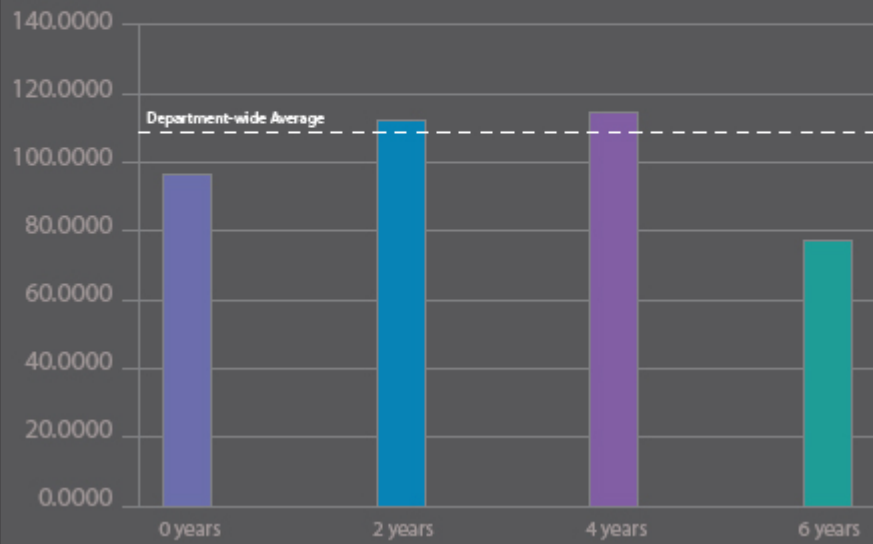


Figure 4

Sick leave hours used per officer, September 1999–September 2002,
by years of formal education beyond high school



The Research Process

Expectations of excellent work habits are characteristics of a professional occupation.⁴ It seemed reasonable that if a police officer had excellent work habits that were consistent with those of members of other professions, then over time policing would be seen as a true profession.

At the Saint Paul Police Department several work habits and possible relationships with education could be quantitatively measured. Thus, if the data at the Saint Paul Police Department indicate that officers with more

education have better work habits, and better work habits result in a perception that they are more professional, then it may be possible to quantitatively contribute to the theory of a relationship between increased professionalism of law enforcement and education beyond high school.

Since all new officers at the Saint Paul Police Department from 1982 had to meet the state requirement for a minimum two-year post-high school degree, this factor would affect the research. It was noted that most officers who held only high school diplomas were older than the college-educated officers. Age and experience could be factors in the work habits under consideration.

The Data

For the purposes of this research, the following demographic and educational data from the Saint Paul Police Department was obtained:

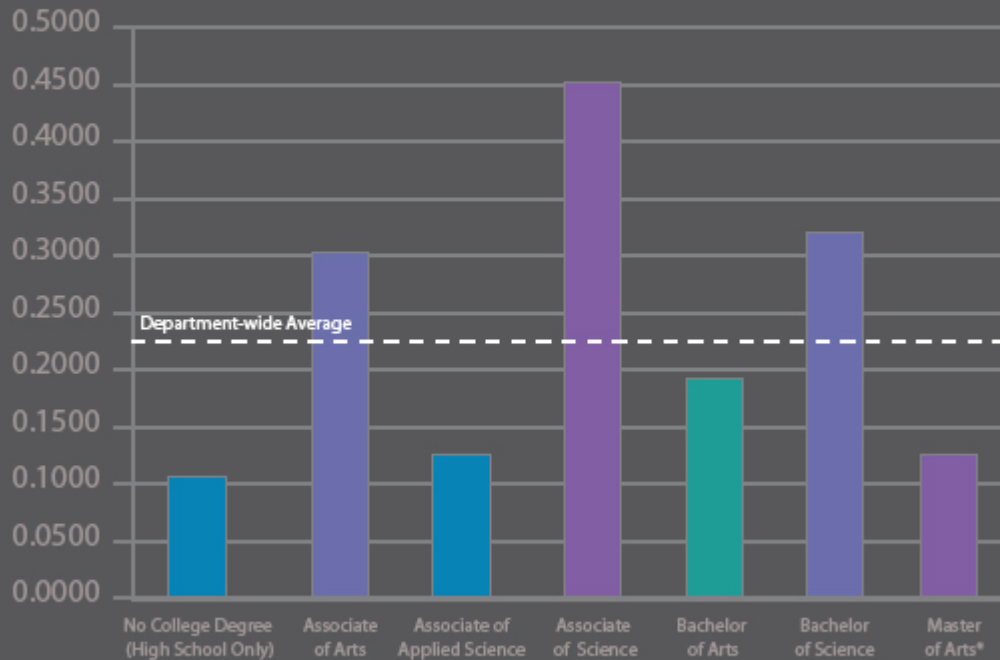
- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Years of experience
- Years of education beyond high school
- Type of college degree

The data selected to assess the work habits of police officers consisted of the following:

- Commendations
- Police vehicle traffic collisions
- Sick time usage
- Number of times disciplined

Figure 5

On-duty vehicle collisions per officer, September 1999–September 2002, by type of college degree



*Officers who had master of science (two) or doctor of philosophy (one) degrees are statistically insignificant, and those degree types are not included here.

These measurements of work habits are not an exhaustive list but were chosen because the data had been collected in a consistent manner for several years at the Saint Paul Police Department. These indicators of work habits are generally objective in nature and not affected by subjective measurements.

The entire population of the Saint Paul Police Department was considered in the research design sample. Therefore, many of the traditional research measures associated with sampling error, validity, and reliability was not needed. The research was also limited to one three-year period, from September 1999 to September 2002. Of the 551 Saint Paul Police Department police officers, 452 met the criteria. Therefore, the total population for the study was 452 police officers.

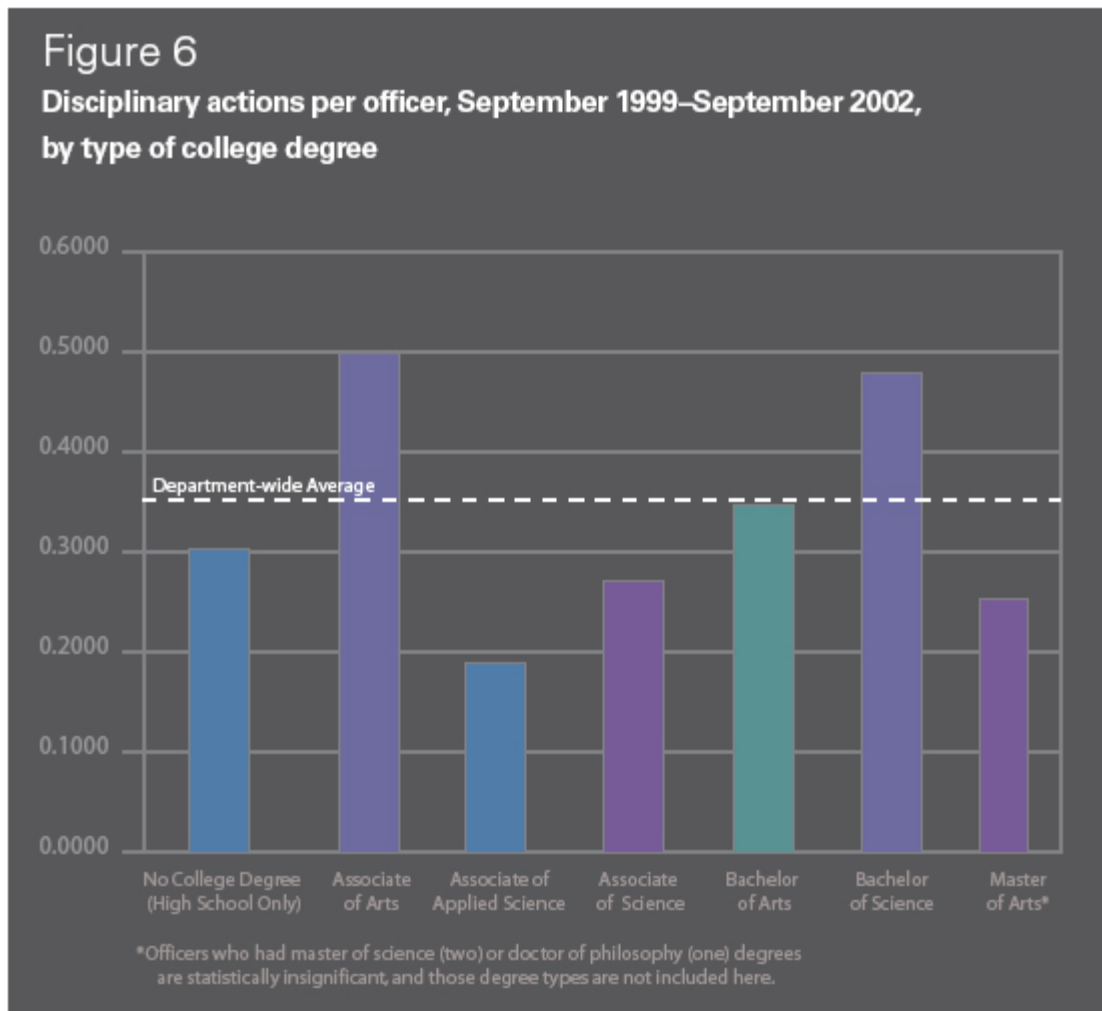
The data was initially examined through the lens of the correlation assumed by the presidential commissions of the 1960s and 1970s between professionalism and higher education. The departmental mean for each work habit was determined with the assumption that some sort of pattern associated with education would emerge.

Education by years of post-high school education was examined in the following manner: a high school diploma was measured as zero years of post-high school education; an associate's degree was measured as two years of post-high school education; a bachelor's degree was measured as four years of post-high school education; and a master's degree was measured as six years of post-high school education. The results of this data

revealed that the mean (average) numbers for Saint Paul police officers' were as follows:

- 39.4 years old
- 12.2 years of experience
- 2.4 years of college education

During a three-year period, the average officer will be in 0.25 vehicle collisions, will be disciplined 0.37 times, use 111.4 hours of sick time, and receive 1.6 commendations.



The

Findings

The data indicated that officers with a high school education had work habits that tended to mirror those of the officers with a master's degree. As the data was further scrutinized, it yielded that officers with high school degrees and graduate degrees were the oldest and had the most experience. In viewing figures 1-4, it is necessary to reinforce that the officers with high school degrees were hired before 1982. After 1982, new officers at the Saint Paul Police Department had to meet the state requirement for a minimum two-year post-high school degree. At this point in the research, the conclusion could be that police officers who are older and have more experience have better work habits. The Saint Paul Police Department data only seemed to corroborate what organizations and human resource managers have known for years.

Nevertheless, at this point in the research process, there was a strong sense that something was being missed. The results were examined again to look for any relationship between work habits and the type of college degree. Only the number of years of post-high school education was first examined and not the type of degree, so this meant that further tests could be completed.

No pattern with any of the various associate degrees was observed. Some degrees were above the mean (average) in one area and below the mean (average) in another. Once again, the officers who only high school diplomas and those who had master of arts degrees fared very well. They were below the mean (average) in the traffic collisions, discipline, and use of sick time, and above the mean (average) in the frequency of commendations. This observation came as no surprise, because the officers with these degrees are the oldest and most experienced.

The Degree Discipline Makes a Difference

There were only two degrees left to examine: the bachelor of arts and the bachelor of science degrees. Interestingly, these groups were nearly equal in population, at 66 and 68 officers respectively. As the data associated with the officers with bachelor of science degrees was reviewed, it was noticed that they were below the mean (average) in the frequency of commendations and above the mean (average) in all the negative work habits of traffic collisions, sick time usage, and discipline.

Officers with bachelor of arts degrees, on the other hand, were above the mean (average) in the frequency that they received commendations and below the mean (average) in traffic collisions, sick time usage, and frequency of discipline. The results of this data are depicted in figures 5-8.

Finding another group of officers who had the same positive work habits as officers with high school diplomas or master of arts degrees was interesting. Next, the age and experience composition of the officers with bachelor of arts degrees was examined. These officers averaged 10 years less in age, and 10 years less in experience than officers with high school diplomas or master of arts degrees.

Some may ask why these results were not observed when measuring the years of post-high school education. The reason is related to the officers with bachelor of science degrees. When bachelor of science degrees were combined with bachelor of arts degrees and simply labeled four-year degrees, the mean (average) of the overall group of officers fell below the mean in the positive work habit and exceeded the mean in the negative work habits.

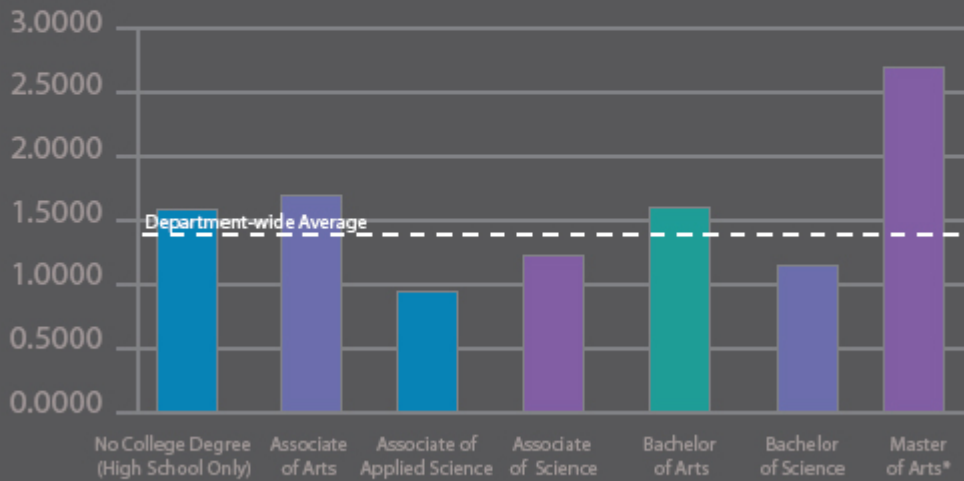
Also, the other demographic data associated with the officers with bachelor of arts degrees was examined and the positive profile (below the mean in the negative work habits of sick time usage, discipline, and traffic collisions and above the mean in commendations) remained consistent, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, and experience.

What do these results seem to indicate? Specific to the Saint Paul Police Department, officers with bachelor of arts degrees have work habits (sick time usage, traffic collisions, discipline, and commendations) that are similar to officers with an additional 10 years of age and experience. It is also worth noting that the officers with 10 years of experience and who exceed 45 years of age are more reflective of officers who are not working in a patrol capacity. This seems to make the officers with bachelor of arts degrees stand out even more. Officers with bachelor of arts degrees tend to work in patrol assignments where they are more likely to receive citizen complaints that could result in discipline and spend more time driving patrol units. It stands to reason that they are likely to have more traffic collisions than older officers who are more frequently working in administrative assignments.

Based on these findings it would appear that a bachelor of arts degree may help positively influence and accelerate a police officer's positive work habits. But it would be premature to make an empirical conclusion that police departments ought to begin hiring police officer candidates with bachelor of arts degrees to the exclusion of others. One must remember that this is only one study of one midsize police department in the Midwest, where only four work habits were measured. Further research should be conducted to determine if these results are replicated in other police departments.

Figure 7

Commendations per officer, September 1999–September 2002,
by type of college degree



*Officers who had master of science (two) or doctor of philosophy (one) degrees are statistically insignificant, and those degree types are not included here.

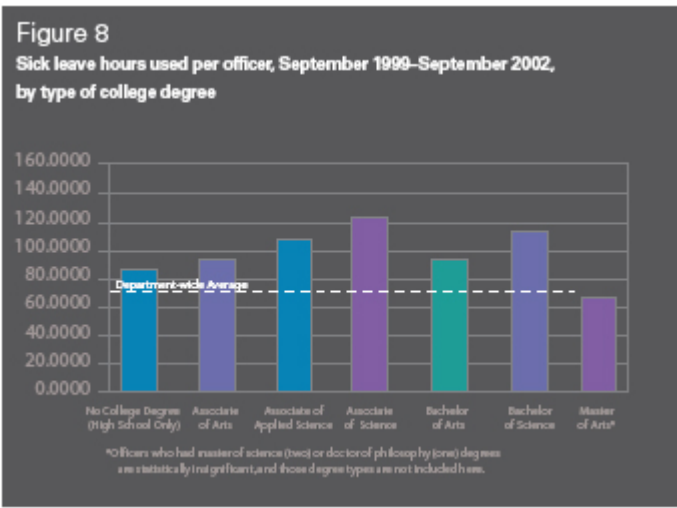
Possible Conclusions

The reason that the officers with bachelor of arts degrees did well in this study could be related to the type of course work required to earn a bachelor of arts degree. For example, a bachelor of arts degree emphasizes problem-solving from a variety of viewpoints, develops understanding of how perceptions influence behavior, increases a person's comfort level with ambiguity, and assumes that the things going on in the world are fluid and interrelated. With this style of thinking, individuals with bachelor of arts degrees are likely more comfortable with the notion that there is more than one way to solve a problem.⁵

In contrast, the officers with bachelor of science degrees tend to be rewarded for collecting verifiable facts and drawing conclusions based on those facts. Frequently in the sciences there is one correct or best answer; or one best way to do things. It seems plausible that as officers attend college and learn to think scientifically in a traditional bachelor of science program, they may encounter resistance from citizens if they use the scientific approach to solving problems. This calls to mind the *Dragnet* television series, in which the officers and detectives would utter the recurring line, "Just the facts, ma'am." Soon after gathering the facts in an impersonal way, the *Dragnet* detectives would prescribe the solution to the crime victim.

These observations are not meant to diminish the value of a bachelor of science degree. The point is that citizens today seem to desire officers who are not impersonal but willing to listen to their concerns and help them solve problems. Most bachelor of arts degree programs encourage the consideration of multiple approaches to problem solving. Perhaps officers with a "just the facts" approach receive more complaints from citizens because of perceived rudeness or lack of empathy.⁶

There is another way to consider these findings. Perhaps the type of degree does not matter at all. The difference may be the type of person who chooses to pursue a bachelor of arts degree instead of a bachelor of science degree. Further research ought to be conducted to evaluate any differences in the individuals who choose a bachelor of arts degree versus a bachelor of science degree.



Future researchers may also wish to identify differences between officers who have four-year degrees before they entered a career in law enforcement versus officers who completed their degrees after they were hired. Monetary implications of hiring officers with bachelor of arts degrees should be considered. Do police departments that hire officers with bachelor of arts degrees actually save money? Specifically, what is the average cost to a police department for a vehicle collision, to investigate a citizen complaint that results in discipline, and to cover for on-duty time lost due to sick time?

In the end, it is possible that the anecdotal recommendations of the presidential commissions in the late 1960s and 1970s were accurate. But possessing a four-year degree at the Saint Paul Police Department does not necessarily correlate with positive

work habits. The positive findings of this research indicate that as a group, officers with bachelor of arts degrees are excellent employees who use less sick time, are involved in fewer traffic collisions, are disciplined less often, and receive more commendations. ■

¹ Minnesota Peace Officer Standards and Training, A Study of the Minnesota Professional Peace Officer Education System (1991).
² National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, Police (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).
³ Brookings Institution, Upgrading the American Police, by C. B. Saunders Jr. (Washington, D.C.: 1970).
⁴ D. L. Carter and A. D. Sapp, "College Education and Policing: Coming of Age," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (January 1992): 8-14.
⁵ D. J. Bell, "The Police Role and Higher Education," Journal of Police Science and Administration, vol. 7, no. 4 (1979): 467-475.
⁶ H. R. Bowen, Investment in Learning: The Individual and Social Value of American Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1977).

Most likely this study can be replicated in other departments. If the study is replicated, please send a copy to Dr. Matthew D. Bostrom, Chief of Staff, Saint Paul Police Department, 367 Grove Street, Saint Paul, MN 55101.