This study addresses a long-standing debate in law enforcement circles, as to whether or not college-educated police officers perform better during their course of duties than do officers without a college degree. Two hundred and five police officers with varying levels of education participated in this study of job performance. In a number of categories, the college-educated police officers (those possessing a bachelor’s degree) rated themselves higher on a self-report performance instrument than did police officers without bachelor’s degrees.

The police in the 1960s were responding to society’s rapidly changing needs as illustrated by the United States Supreme Court rulings on criminal procedure. In addition, there was the emergence of a youthful counterculture, the Civil Rights movement was in high gear, and civil disobedience and anti-war protests were common. Violent, destructive
riots in a number of major American cities were brought into the living room by the television or the news media. A chasm was growing between the police and certain segments of the public. Therefore, “The President’s Commission recommended that police educational standards be raised, with the ultimate goal of requiring a baccalaureate degree as a minimum standard for employment” (Radlet and Carter, 1994:150).

The President’s Commission of the late 1960s mirrored the thinking of scholars and police administrators in that the problems facing police could be blamed on the poor quality of personnel. It was argued that many problems could be solved if more qualified people, particularly college graduates, were recruited as police officers. “The idea that police officers should be college educated has become a cornerstone of the movement to professionalize the police since first suggested by August Vollmer” (Sherman, 1978:18).

As early as 1920, scholars were concluding that the heart of the police problem is one of personnel (Fosdick, 1969). Most policemen did not finish high school, scored below average on intelligence tests, received little or no training, earned inadequate salaries, remained in the job into their 60s and 70s, and were largely unqualified at the onset (Fogelson, 1977). Police were hired through political patronage rather than through merit, and were protected by that patronage. August Vollmer claimed, “When we have reached a point where the best people in society are selected for police service, there will be little confusion regarding their duties” (Vollmer, 1971).

Research suggests that higher education for police officers provides a number of benefits. Carter et al. (1989) claim that the benefits of a college education for police officers engenders the ability to handle difficult or ambiguous situations with greater creativity or innovation.

Not surprisingly, experts have differed on what makes a good officer. Research shows, for example, that college-educated officers tend to be less authoritative and less cynical (Shernock, 1992). But these are qualities for police officers that some people suggest are important to retain. Studies have shown that police officers with college educations had fewer citizen complaints, shorter response times, fewer injuries and accidents, are less likely to be assaulted, issue more traffic violations, make more arrests and engage in more frequent detection practices (Shernock, 1992). Studies about police performance are fraught with extraneous influencing factors such as poor record keeping or nonexistent performance records.
However, Blumberg and Niederhoffer (1985) write that if education is related to professionalism, educated police professionals should have:

- more support for a service function;
- independence from supervision and more discretion;
- autonomy in decision making;
- greater value on ethical conduct;
- greater support for lateral entry;
- less support for maintaining organizational secrets;
- value placed on efficiency.

Shernock (1992) found that educated police do, in fact, place a higher value on the importance of ethics and that higher education enhances personal responsibility for their professional actions.

Two of the most important objectives facing police officers today are the control of serious crime and the resolution of conflict. To date, American police have failed to accomplish these objectives. The failures of policing are not caused by incompetence or laziness. Rather, they reflect the inadequacy of the methods available to the police for accomplishing their objectives (Sherman, 1978). The myth that police know how to control crime is fostered by the police themselves and the public generates a “mood of blame setting when crime happens”.

Moreover, unlike the medical profession, where research is an intricate component of the healing process, and where they are constantly testing and refining new procedures, police departments have failed to weave research and experimentation into their institutional fabric (Bittner, 1970).

Even though the typical police response to crime is to increase patrols, studies have indicated that police time spent driving the streets waiting for something to happen is not time well spent. To counter this “traditional” response to managing crime control, upgrading police personnel at the entry level will enhance the ability of police to solve problems. Collective educational experiences, including the marriage of research and practical applications of successful experimentation, will be one important result of recruiting educated police. In short, improving
police performance with college degrees for the members of police departments continues to be a necessity in order to further criminal justice effectiveness.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This study adds to the body of research on the effectiveness of an educated police force. In 1989 the Police Executive Research Forum (Carter et al., 1989) surveyed police agencies across the country. In that survey, police administrators were asked to rate the value of educated police officers on a number of indicators, including their ability to communicate both orally and in written form. Overall, the study found that college-educated officers have certain advantages over those without a college degree.

This study employed a self-reported performance survey directed at the police officers themselves. Police officers from Howell Township, New Jersey and Bucks County, Pennsylvania anonymously responded to a questionnaire. The respondents were asked to rate their own performance on the questionnaire. The officers in Howell Township received the questionnaires at the station house. The entire police department was surveyed. Forty-eight officers out of 60 (80 percent) participated in the study. Three hundred officers from Bucks County were mailed questionnaires to their homes, and 157 (52 percent) returned the document. The officers participating in the study rated themselves on 45 separate police performance indicators (see Appendix).

The survey sampling frame contained a pool of available police officers as subjects. They are employed in various sized departments. Some respondents work in small departments with less than ten officers. Others work in somewhat larger departments with less than 25 officers. The sample also included departments of more than 25 police officers, but none with more than 80 officers. Thus the study reached police officers from departments of 80, down to departments with less than ten members. The police departments represented in this study are typical (nationally) of small to medium sized departments.
METHODOLOGY

The police officers anonymously responded to a questionnaire which contained 45 separate performance indicators (45 dependent variables). The performance indicators appeared in the form of a Likert scale on which the respondents were asked to rate themselves on each indicator, as: significantly above average; moderately above average; standard; marginally below standard; and significantly below standard.

The police officers responding to the questionnaire provided a mix of background characteristics including age, rank and whether or not they served in the military. More importantly, for this study, is the independent variable of education. Of the Bucks County officers, 27 percent and of the Howell Township, 31 percent of police officers reported having a bachelor’s degree or higher. Table 1 contains a profile of the independent variables analyzed in this study.

The variables on the self-reported performance questionnaire were adopted from the New Jersey State Police Performance Evaluation Report. This report, in its unaltered format, is used by police supervisors in the state police to measure the performance of their troopers. The police supervisors are asked to rate the troopers under their command on a three-point scale: unsatisfactory; some improvement needed; and competent. To create an intensity scale (used in this study), the three-point scale used by the state police was converted into a five-point Likert scale.2

The questionnaire responses were analyzed in the aggregate; that is, each performance indicator was analyzed as a total group response. The mean and standard deviation for each performance indicator was calculated and a Student’s “t” was used to isolate those performance indicators having a statistically significant difference between the group of officers possessing a bachelor’s degree versus those officers not possessing a bachelor’s degree.

THE UTILITY OF SELF-REPORT PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

This study employed a self-reported performance instrument because efforts to obtain performance evaluations from local police departments became problematic. Two main problems emerged regarding police performance evaluations, at least in the suburban police departments around Trenton, New Jersey and Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania. First, local police administrators admitted that they had stopped conducting performance evaluations because they caused morale problems. Pressure was put on administrators to conduct performance evaluations only when promotional exams were upcoming. Second, in police departments where performance evaluations were conducted, there existed no standardized format. Moreover, even if a researcher was permitted to collect the performance evaluations, there are no identifying variables (independent variables) on the forms, such as age, education or years in the job.

These problems with police officer performance evaluations are elaborated on by Walsh and Donovan (1990). In their book, they claim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES USED IN THE STUDY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Howell Township</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>N = 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrolman</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detectives</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeants</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lieutenants</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captains</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiefs</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporals</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age when Hired</td>
<td>Mean = 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Served</td>
<td>Mean = 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Forces?</td>
<td>Yes = 31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Cadet?</td>
<td>Yes = 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Degree Completed</td>
<td>HS = 39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AA = 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA = 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MA = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White = 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male = 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married?</td>
<td>Yes = 87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Age</td>
<td>Mean = 38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that police performance evaluations are commonly either too lenient, tend to be scored centrally, contain halo errors or are biased because of occupational stereotypes. Thus, the self-reported performance questionnaires in this study were used to overcome the aforementioned problems.

Houston (1995) writes that self-reported performance questionnaires are useful instruments when a manager or consultant needs a picture of an existing work unit or organization. Self-report performance measures are appropriate when a relatively uncomplicated "road map" is required to study the needs of an organization. Campbell and Lee (1988) argue that self-appraisal performance measures are useful to complement supervisory ratings or when they are utilized to help employees improve job performance. Further, self-reported performance tools are useful when other evaluation formats overlook certain aspects of the employees' performance. This may be extremely helpful when researching police performance, as patrol officers operate in many instances without direct supervision.

Gianakis (1994) concludes in his study of police performance appraisals that patrol personnel typically enjoy great discretion and function as virtual franchises once they are in their patrol vehicles. Gianakis suggests an interactive evaluation approach where the officer would participate in her/his own performance evaluation. This conclusion was based on Gianakis' factor analysis of performance measures where "respondents manifested a great deal of consensus regarding the importance of individual performance dimensions". In short, police officers' self-performance ratings, in certain circumstances, were not much different from actual supervisory ratings.

Thus, where self-reported performance appraisals (when used alone) are not necessarily the best method of evaluating police officer performance, they represent a valid performance picture if used as an evaluation tool for organizational purposes. In other words, without any employee performance documentation, self-reported performance instruments at least offer a valid snapshot of the organization's behavior.

At the onset, this research sought to achieve two objectives. First, it was designed to anticipate police performance measurement problems where no performance measures existed. Second, the research sought to acquire an organizational snapshot of the current state of affairs. The use of self-reported performance appraisals met these research objectives.

Nevertheless, meeting the above research objectives did not necessarily negate problems with internal validity. As an example,
nothing prevented a respondent from assigning himself/herself high scores. The problem of inflating scores may be adequately compensated in ways addressed previously in this paper. Self-reported appraisals can be as accurate as any. That is to say, without any other form of appraisal, self-reported instruments can be considered accurate.

Additionally, asking police officers to respond to a series of questions as “they see themselves” presents other potential validity problems. For example, who is to say that “level of confidence in supervisors” or “ability to accept direction” are accurate indicators of police performance. Actually, scoring low on these indicators may be preferable in certain circumstances. This problem is the major threat to internal validity in studies such as this.

Babbie (1995) points out that Likert scaling has become a common format in questionnaire construction and offers the researcher the preferred ordinal measure. However, the use of the Likert scale in this format is actually an “individual item index”. A simple individual item index allows the researcher to compare the average scores of each variable. This is the method of analysis used in the current study. It permitted an examination of individual performance indicators by highly-educated police versus those with less than a bachelor’s degree. This study did not create a situation in which scores could be aggregated to identify a high-scoring officer or a low-scoring one. It did, however, offer the researcher an opportunity to present some differences between individual officers in a simple indicator format.

Collecting performance measures in this fashion will also allow police policy makers to examine the “big picture” in terms of where remediation may be indicated. For example, when the individual index scores were rank ordered in Howell Township, New Jersey, the lowest index was “off duty participation in community projects”. Police planners in that jurisdiction may wish to implement policy encouraging participation in community projects.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The educated police officers in Howell Township rated themselves higher than the non-degreed officers in three categories. Their ratings were statistically significant on knowledge of departmental rules, use of safety practices and ability to accept change. In the Bucks County group the educated police officers rated themselves higher on a number
of performance indicators. The Bucks County officers rated themselves significantly higher in their ability to utilize employee contacts, knowledge of the law, preparedness for court, quality of work assignments, level of problem-solving ability, level of arrest analysis, level of confidence with supervisors, quality of written work, quality of oral presentations, self-image, arrest report quality, investigative report quality and interpersonal relationships. The results appear in Table 2.

In both samples the respondents possessing a bachelor’s degree or higher scored better in almost all performance indicator categories. The officers possessing a bachelor’s degree in Howell Township, New Jersey rated themselves higher on 89 percent of the 45 performance indicators. In Bucks County, Pennsylvania the responses were similar. Police officers with a bachelor’s degree rated themselves higher in 91 percent of the categories.

The results of this study offer some insight into the problem of rating the performance of police officers. First, this study found

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANT “t” TESTS FOR PERFORMANCE INDICATORS*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Degreed Mean</th>
<th>Degreed sd</th>
<th>Not Degreed Mean</th>
<th>Not Degreed sd</th>
<th>“t”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Howell Township</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Departmental Rules</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.611</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Safety Practices</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.640</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.829</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Accept Change</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.941</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>0.783</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bucks County</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize Employee Contacts</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.828</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.683</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the Law</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.674</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.654</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness for Court</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.686</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.674</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Work Assignments</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.630</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving Ability</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.549</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.714</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Arrest Analysis</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>0.707</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.738</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence with Supervisors</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Written Work</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.842</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Oral Presentations</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-image</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.721</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.795</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest Report Quality</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.720</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.734</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigative Report Quality</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.794</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.751</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relationships</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.688</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.792</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at 0.05 level
differences in performance ratings between police officers possessing a bachelor’s degree or higher and those officers possessing lower level qualifications. This finding may indicate that educated officers are better performing officers, or it may indicate differences in perceptions about their duties. Whichever is the case, the educated officers appear to have advantages over their nondegreeed counterparts. It makes sense, for example, that college-educated officers would report better written and oral communication skills.

Another insight this study provides is the efficacy of self-administered questionnaires as a data collection strategy for police policy makers. The police policy maker can employ such an instrument and gain insight as to where remediation is needed. The use of self-administered questionnaires can serve as a device to collect baseline information not otherwise available. This was the case in Howell Township and Bucks County. In Howell Township the officers did not participate in meaningful performance evaluations. In Bucks County the use of periodic performance evaluations are sporadic. If police departments are serious about personnel evaluations, efforts could be initiated to establish accurate performance measures (agreed on by line and staff) and this issue could be further analyzed.

NOTES

1. The list of officers and their addresses was obtained from the local membership roster of the Fraternal Order of Police.

2. The application of the state police performance tool for this study is appropriate as the local police and the state police essentially perform the same kind of duties.

3. The author questioned administrators in six mid-sized police departments in the Philadelphia-Trenton area regarding the analysis of existing performance reports.

REFERENCES


**Appendix:**

**Police Performance Indicators**

- Ability to accept responsibility
- Level of self-confidence
- Degree of professional stability
- Ethical conduct
- Observance of work hours
- Loyalty
- Ability to coordinate tasks
- Level of problem-solving ability
- Degree of professional flexibility
Effectiveness under stress
Ability to accept direction
Self-image
Grooming and dress
Community relations
Quality of work assignments
Absence of reprimands or suspensions
Investigative report quality
Ability to utilize public contacts
Ability to utilize employee contacts
Volume of acceptable work
Meeting deadlines
Use of safety practices
Response time to calls
Attendance
Appearance of workstation
Preparedness for court
Interpersonal relationships
Knowledge of the law
Ability to organize investigations
Overall job satisfaction
Knowledge of departmental rules
Effective interaction with supervisors
Quality of oral presentations
Investigative leadership
Level of arrest analysis
Appropriate use of injury time
Ability to accept change
Persistence in pursuit of justice
Appropriate use of sick time
Ability to utilize suspect contacts
Level of confidence in supervision
Awards received
Off-duty participation in community projects