



POLICE REFORM ACTION BRIEF:

EDUCATION AND TRAINING



**CENTER for
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RESEARCH**
TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY



As the rallying cry for police reform continues into 2021, law enforcement departments everywhere should implement more education requirements for their officers. A 2010 study from Michigan State University criminal justice researchers shows that police officers with a four-year college degree are less likely to use force.¹

At the heart of it, higher educated officers resort to violence less. Police departments with more college-educated officers have relatively fewer use of force complaints by citizens and fewer terminations due to misconduct. They also foster better police-community relationships.² Given the

suggestions of this research, communities will be served better – and less violently – by increasing officers’ educational attainment. Given the country is in the midst of a student loan crisis, it may not be feasible for officers to seek higher education. However, there have been suggestions for free community-college education by Democrats,³ and some police departments offer tuition reimbursement programs.⁴

Educational gaps: There are an estimated 18,000 federal, state, county, and local law enforcement agencies⁵ with about 700,000 full-time sworn officers.⁶ Although standardized accredited



Police departments with more college-educated officers have relatively fewer use of force complaints...

1 Rydberg, J., & Terrill, W. (2010). The effect of higher education on police behavior. *Police quarterly*, 13(1), 92-120.

2 Bouffard, L., & Armstrong, G. (2020). 5 reasons police officers should have college degrees. *The Conversation*.

3 Providing a world-class education in every zip code - Democrats. Democrats.

4 City of Chicago Tuition Reimbursement Program and Verification of Academic Credentials. Chicago Police Department.

5 Banks, D., Hendrix, J., Hickman, M. & Kyckelhan, T. (2016) National Sources of Law Enforcement Employment Data. U.S. Department of Justice.

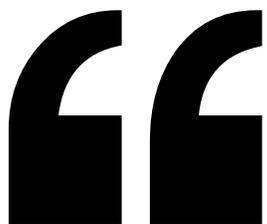


Source: Forbes Magazine

law enforcement training requirements exist to guide agencies in preparing officers for the job of policing, there are substantial disparities among departments in the minimum requirements needed to become a certified law enforcement officer. The U.S. Bureau of Justice found that:

- About 15% of departments require some level of college education
- 10% of departments required a two-year degree
- Only 1% of departments required a college degree from a four-year institution⁵

Less education, more force: One study reported that police officers with a four-year degree are almost 40% less likely to use various types of force, ranging from verbal commands to causing physical injury.⁷ A separate study of police shootings across 15 years found that police officers with four-year college educations were nearly 30% less likely to discharge their firearms.⁸ Furthermore, agencies where officers had at least a two-year degree had a lower rate of civilian complaints about the use of force.⁹



Officers with four-year degrees were nearly 30% less likely to discharge their firearm.

6 Hyland, S., & Davis, E. (2019). Local Police Departments, 2016: Personnel. U.S. Department of Justice.

7 Rydberg, J., & Terrill, W. (2010). The effect of higher education on police behavior. *Police Quarterly*, 13(1), 92-120.

8 McElvain, J. P., & Kposowa, A. J. (2008). Police officer characteristics and the likelihood of using deadly force. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 35(4), 505-521.

9 Shjarback, J. A., & White, M. D. (2016). Departmental professionalism and its impact on indicators of violence in police-citizen encounters. *Police Quarterly*, 19(1), 32-62.



This suggests that increased educational levels among police provide an added assurance to agency leaders – and the community – that officers can give each situation a thorough critical assessment that leads to an effective, non-violent resolution. To be clear, college credits and degrees do not guarantee that officers are better. However, there appears to be a relationship between education and the use of force worth further discovery.

Effective policing in a diverse society: Whether police agencies are large or small, it is imperative that their officers are culturally aware and prepared to provide lawful policing services to their diverse communities. Officers must receive the training to meet the dynamics of a technologically advanced, multi-ethnic society. Traditional standardized accreditation training focused solely on the tactical measures of policing is woefully inadequate in today’s society. Twenty-first century policing should include critical thinking skills and social consciousness to make decisions that protect both officers and the general public.

It is essential to note that when considering the expanse of daily law enforcement interactions in communities, these interactions are primarily service-oriented rather than law enforcement. As found in a Bureau of Justice Statistics report, 94.6% of police-initiated contact with citizens occurred to provide a service or assistance to citizens.¹⁰ Relatedly, police contact with the mental health population has increased as this nation grapples with a lack of services offered to individuals who do not have access to wellbeing resources because of systemic/institutional neglect and this country’s pattern of criminalizing mental health instead of treating it.

¹⁰ Davis, E., Whyde, A., & Langton, L. (2018). Contacts Between Police and the Public, 2015. U.S. Department of Justice.



One study reported that roughly 25% of citizens with mental health diagnoses have a history of arrest. Further, people with untreated mental health needs are 16 times more likely than the general population to be killed during a police encounter.¹¹ These startling rates of police contact with mental health populations demonstrate the critical need for advanced police training on interacting with this particular community to avoid unnecessary criminalizing of treatable people.

Departments also have an opportunity and responsibility to change how they define community policing. Those efforts must include incorporating community feedback in their processes, policies, and training, which is a unique space to incorporate citizens' input. Departments in Atlanta¹², Los Angeles¹³, Washington DC¹⁴, and New York¹⁵ all have community policing or engagement programs that solicit community member feedback on best practices for increased positive interactions between law enforcement and citizens. These practices include advisory councils, community affairs boards, and population-specific boards hinging on neighborhood, race, and in Los Angeles, an LGBTQ outreach unit.

“People with untreated mental health needs are 16 times more likely than the general population to be killed during a police encounter..”

11 The Leadership Conference Education Fund. New Era of Public Safety: A Guide to Fair, Safe, and Effective Community Policing.

12 Community Policing Programs.

13 Community Policing Unit. LAPD.

14 Citizens Advisory Councils (CAC). Metropolitan Police Department. .

15 Community Affairs. NYPD. .

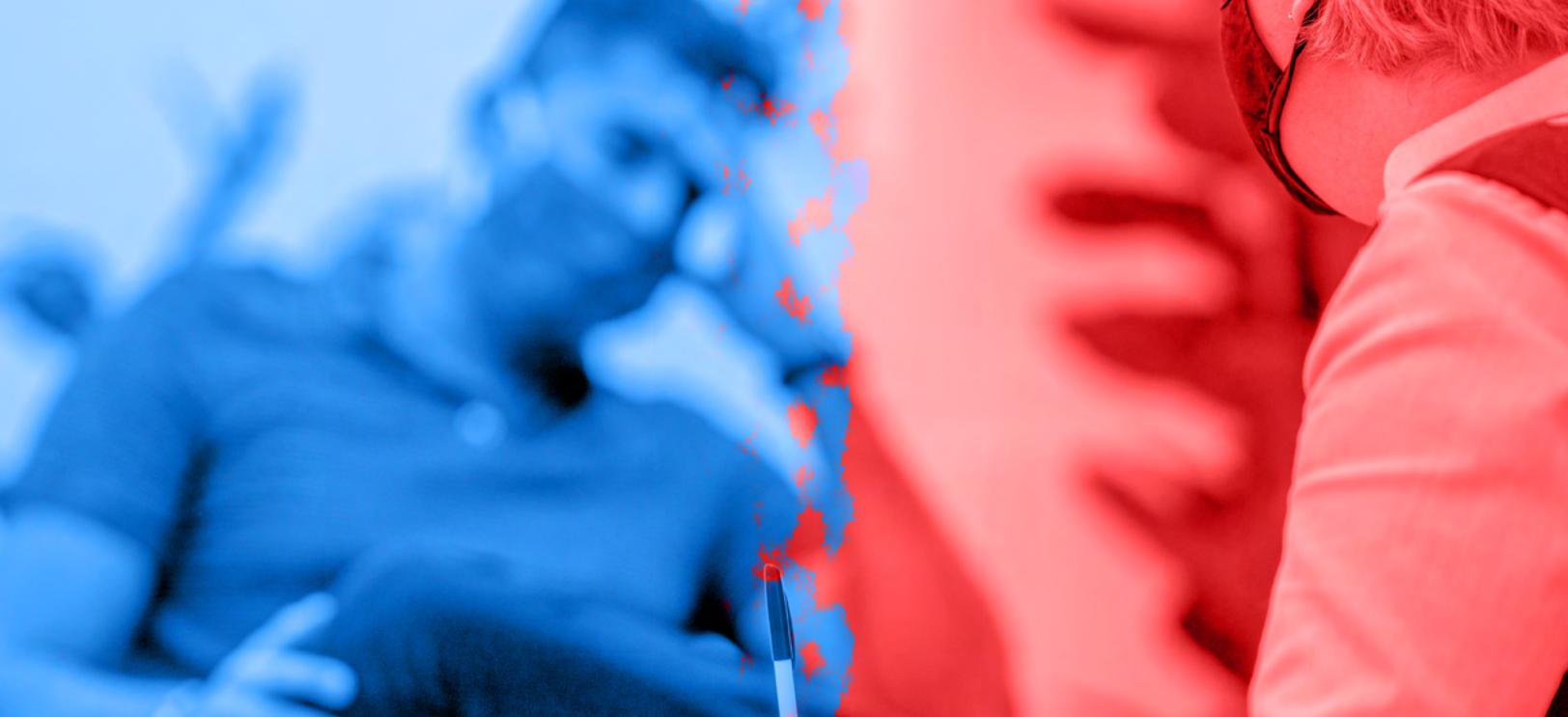


As state, local, and federal lawmakers, mayors, law enforcement, and other key stakeholders consider advancing police reform in their respective jurisdiction, CJR recommends the following:

- Allocate federal, state, or local funding and benchmarks for increasing education.
- Advocate that law enforcement agencies develop an education standard for police officers.
- Develop partnerships between police agencies and mental health services, providing agencies and professionals with a guide to best practices when interacting with individuals who need specialized attention, support, and protocol due to specific mental and physical needs.
- Standardize universal training specific to racial profiling, bias, and mental health practices.
- Engage in community conversations to access citizen perspectives and community expectations.
- Invite the U.S. Justice Department and local agencies to work with universities.

Example Training/Education Policies

- [City of Madison Police Department](#)
- [State of Georgia Training Requirements](#)
- [Massachusetts Statutory Requirements](#)
- [Cambridge Massachusetts Department](#)
- [Los Angeles Police Department Community Policing Unit](#)
- [New York Police Department Community Civilian Training Program](#)
- [Washington DC Citizens Advisory Councils](#)



This action brief is one in a series of issue briefs offering concrete solutions to save lives, reduce police brutality, promote equal justice, and build safe, positive relations between police and the people they serve. Other action briefs cover:

- [Ban Chokeholds](#)
- Duty to Intervene
- Ban No-Knock Warrants
- Qualified Immunity
- Reallocation of Police Funds

Acknowledgements:

Dr. Paul Elam, Chris Andrews, Dr. Warren Dukes, Dr. Jennifer Wyatt Bourgeois, and Bezil Taylor

Suggested Citation:

TSU Center for Justice Research:

(2021). Police Reform Action Brief: Education and Training. *Texas Southern University-Center for Justice Research*.

The Center for Justice Research, at Texas Southern University, is available to discuss how they can advise on evidence-based, effective police reform policies and practices on the national, state and local levels – concrete steps that law enforcement can take to bridge the racial divide. They can be reached at justice.research@tsu.edu or 713-313-6843.

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Police Misconduct



NEXT IN THE SERIES: NATIONAL POLICEMISCONDUCT DATABASE





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