

# MINNESOTA Police Chief

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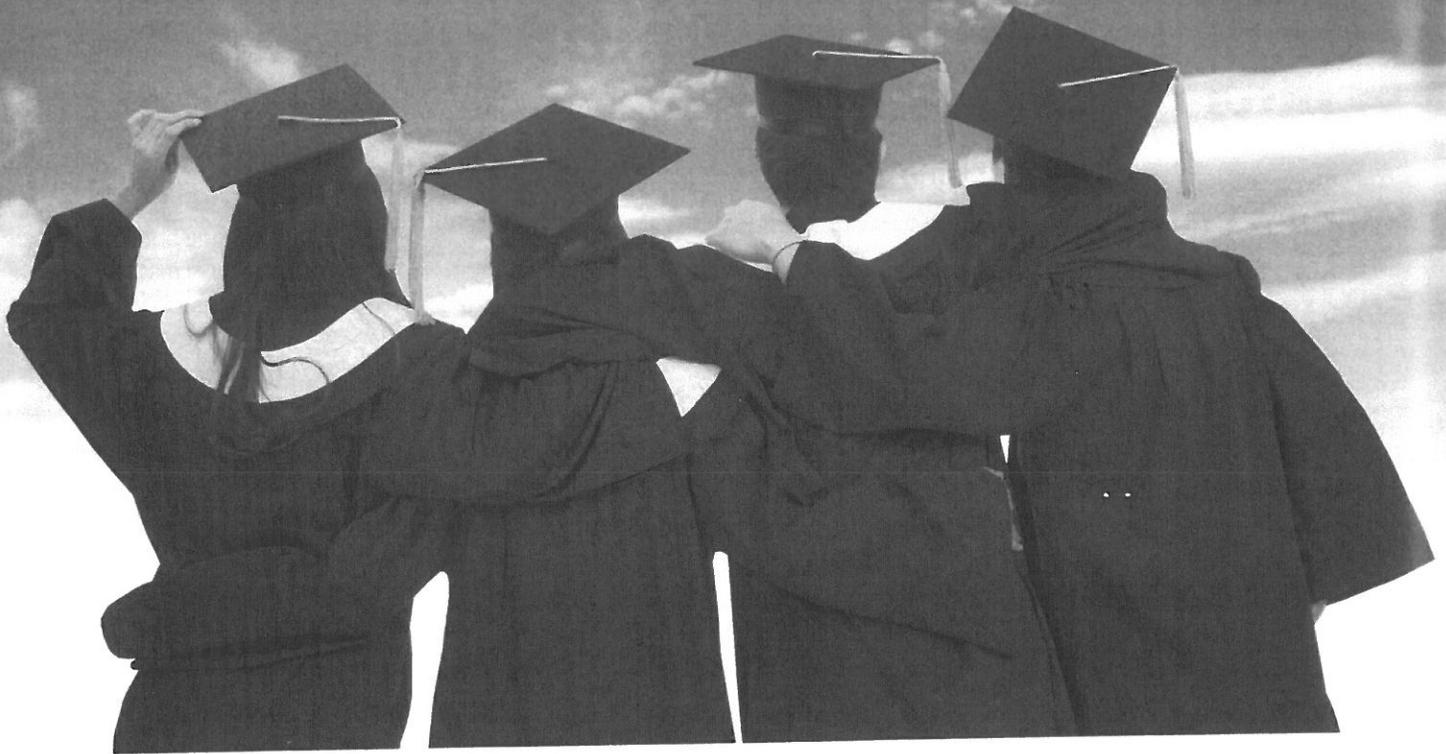
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## The Rise of the Educated Officer and the Death of the Keystone Kop: A Review of College Education and Law Enforcement

By Sergeant Erik Johnston, Officer Justin Pletcher, Columbia Heights Police Department

### Fellow chiefs and Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association Members:

*As I am sure you are aware, Minnesota continues to lead the nation in professional peace officer education. We were one of the first states to require a two-year college degree for prospective peace officers over two decades ago and the level of education has continued to increase to the point where we are now seeing more applicants with four-year and graduate degrees. The following article is taken from a "white paper" that was written by two of my staff on trends in Minnesota law enforcement education and its impacts on our profession. As you will see in the article, the impacts of education in my agency have been profound; as I am sure they may be in yours. As we continue our professional progression towards the use of advanced policing strategies that will utilize technology, problem-solving, intelligence, crime mapping and trend analysis and use of community partners, education will continue to be an integral part of our hiring and promotional decisions. For copies of the*

*full and unedited paper which includes sources, or questions about the paper or subject, please feel free to contact me at [scott.nadeau@ci.columbia-heights.mn.us](mailto:scott.nadeau@ci.columbia-heights.mn.us)*

*Scott Nadeau, Police Chief, City of Columbia Heights*

"When I started in police work, all that was in the squad car was a radio, a red light and a shotgun." This recent comment, made by a fellow police sergeant, was very telling about just how far police work has come in recent years. This was not the lament of a long retired officer back to tell his favorite war stories, but rather a comment from one that was still in the midst of a law enforcement career. A peek inside a squad car today paints a completely different picture in terms of the equipment and technology a new officer must master to be successful. Officers now have laptops, video camera systems, GPS tracking and fingerprint identification devices just to name a few. The red gumball light has been replaced with a high-intensity LED light bar and the shotgun is now in the

form of a high-capacity AR-15 assault rifle. While the radio is still in place, chances are the new 800 MHZ system has a channel reserved for communicating with NASA in the event we are needed to help land a shuttle.

Officers have always had to perform many roles and wear a multitude of different hats in the course of their duties. In this modern era of policing, these roles have become even more ambiguous with additional expectations being placed on officers. Officers used to be instructed to perform a task; essentially, they were "call takers." Now, officers are expected to be problem solvers who work more autonomously and have more options, more discretion and ultimately, more outcomes. For example, use of force by police officers has become a hot topic, regularly represented in the media as overused and often misunderstood. Complex continuums are now used to explain how force should be applied and each type can have a different outcome. How an officer solves the problem ultimately determines more than just an arrest, as our increasingly litigious society continues to hold officers to higher standards for their decision making.

The community policing reform that begun decades ago continues to hold interest as a way of promoting police and community interaction. Officers are no longer being allowed to "band-aid" community problems. In addition, the mid 1990s New York Police Commissioner William Bratton started a landmark change in crime fighting with his Comp-Stat method of crime tracking and response (Bratton, 1998). This combination has heralded in a new era of policing in which we are using computer mapping, trend analysis and community partnerships to leverage a police response into more effective and longer lasting results.

In the Kansas City Patrol Experiment, it was determined there was little to no effect in simply increasing patrol officers as a way of solving crime. (Kelling et al., 1974). Instead, an intelligent and measured response is the more



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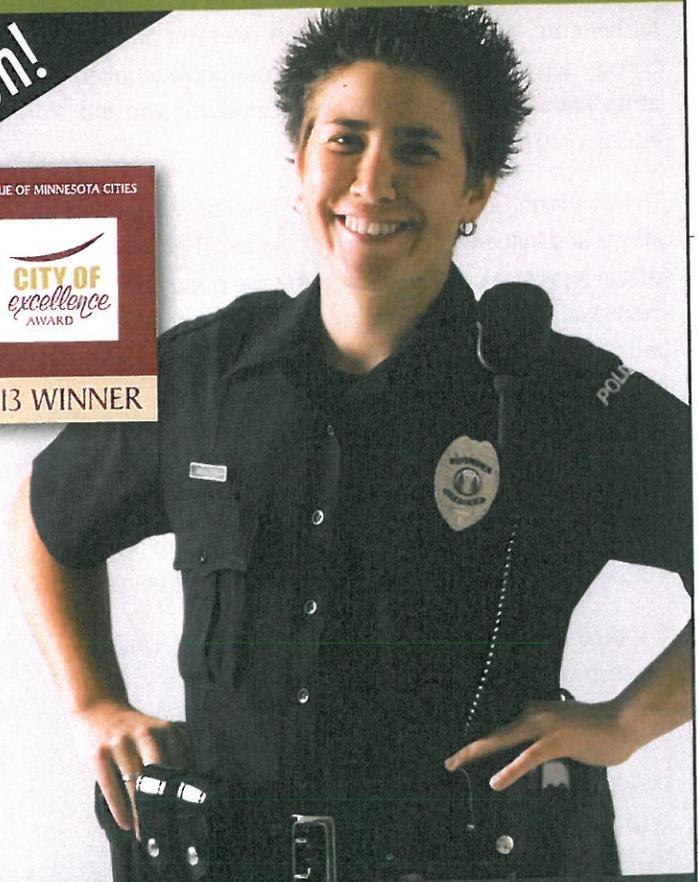
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effective way to direct police resources when working to solve community problems (CHPD, 2012). Columbia Heights Police Chief Scott Nadeau explained, "Officers need to fully understand the problem, provide a thoughtful analysis of alternatives, research the best practices and assemble a comprehensive plan that includes multiple stakeholders and leverages community resources to reduce or eliminate the problem." This modern problem-solving officer, and their organization, is the future of policing and have made higher education an increasingly important attribute for police officers to possess.

## THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

The benefits of a college education have long been debated in police work. The rising cost in both time and money are valid considerations for both the individual and the profession. The Pew Research Center found 57 percent of Americans believed college education did not provide a good value (Taylor et al., 2011). However, among college students surveyed 86 percent indicated that college was a good investment for them. A smaller portion (55 percent) indicated it was helpful to prepare for a career or job. The Pew report does note a college degree holder will earn on average an additional \$20,000 per year over the course of a lifetime. Of further note, is that while police work does not often require a college degree, higher education is commonly required in other "helping" professions like social work, nursing and education (Hilal and Densley, 2013).

The Common Good Forecaster examined how education affects and influences community welfare. Their analysis found that in New Mexico alone, increasing the population's individual education by one level of schooling would see a murder rate that dropped by over 50 percent and an incarceration rate that dropped over 60 percent. The FBI Uniform Crime Report showed that in 2004 the ten states with the highest college enrollment rates showed, on average, a much lower violent crime rate. Minnesota was among the highest enrollments and had a violent crime rate of 269.6 per 100,000; significantly lower than the national average of 465.5.

It should be noted that there is a belief among a portion of those in law enforcement that a college degree is not needed and that on-the-job experience provides an officer with the necessary skills and knowledge. This is a common lament by police officers seeking a degree because the climate of their organization is moving towards higher-educated officers and they feel, or know, it will be needed as a requirement for promotion. It often includes a reference to a retired family member that was highly successful and was promoted up the

chain with a high school education. There is no doubt that with time and experience police work regularly sees better results in proficiency and professionalism. However, education and experience result in the best policing performance overall (Scott et al, 2009).

## HIGHER EDUCATION AT WORK

Ramsey County Sherriff Matthew D. Bostrom conducted a study of the St. Paul Police Department to determine if education level was a good predictor for work habits (2005). Bostrom focused on four categories, which included sick time used, number of traffic collisions, disciplinary frequency and commendations received. What Bostrom's study of St. Paul showed was that, among other things, officers with a Masters level of education scored significantly higher than officers with a bachelors degree or below. This correlation of education and professionalism is what Bostrom initially sought to confirm with his study.

What Bostrom didn't expect to find initially was officers with two-year degrees did not differ much from those holding bachelor degrees. However, when those bachelor degrees were broken down, Bostrom found the types of degrees showed great variation in work habits. Ultimately, officers with



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bachelor of arts degrees, such as criminology and sociology, showed a significant positive advantage over other degrees. Bostrom concluded that officers with bachelor of arts degrees may have succeeded due to course work which emphasized problem-solving from various viewpoints, as well as understanding how perception influences behavior, but felt that additional research should be done.

## THE PUBLIC BENEFIT

The public also benefits from educated police officers. A recent study in *Police Quarterly* showed that officers with college education used force 56 percent of the time, while those with only a high school diploma resorted to force 68 percent of the time (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Not only is this a significant number of citizens that were not exposed to force; those officers that refrained were also less likely to risk injury and time away from the job. A study in *Criminal Justice and Behavior* found that officers with 11 or more years of experience used force 51 percent of the time (Paoline & Terrill, 2007). This shows the similar effects that education and experience have on policing, but the reality is a lot can happen in those 11 years.

The level of problem solving that both experience and

education offers is demonstrated when examining complaints brought against officers. Research has shown that while there is no major statistical difference in the number of officer-generated complaints when comparing officers with two-year degrees to those with four years of college, there is a significant difference in sustained complaints with officers who have a college education over those who do not. According to a study conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) using the Florida Criminal Justice State and Training Commission, police officers with only a high school diploma (58 percent of the total police force) were subject to 78 percent of all disciplinary actions. Officers with two-year degrees (16 percent of the force) were subject to 12 percent and police officers with bachelor's degree made up 24 percent of the police force and were subject to only 11 percent of all disciplinary actions (Mayo, 2006).

## FROM CALL TAKER TO PROBLEM SOLVER

Minnesota has long been on the vanguard of police reform and the move towards a higher standard of skill and professionalism. In 1977, it created the first licensing requirement for police officers and in 1978, a two-year degree became the minimum requirement for all new officers in the

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state. As of 2003, only nine percent of police departments nationally required a two-year degree and only one percent required a four-year degree. In addition, police officers in Minnesota are more educated than the general population, showing 34.7 percent of police officers have a bachelor's degree compared to 27.4 percent of the population (Hilal & Erickson, 2010).

The Columbia Heights Police Department is a great example of a department progression where officers have obtained an increasingly higher level of education. In 1983, almost half of the police officers did not have a college education (CHPD, 2013). In 2013, over half of the officers (52 percent) have a bachelor's degree or higher. In addition, another 25 percent of the officers are actively engaged in pursuit of a bachelor's or a master's degree (CHPD, 2013). This increase has coincided with a higher level of professionalism and an overall increase in effectiveness of police response as measured through a sustained crime reduction and a stronger partnership with the community. The officers have progressed beyond merely solving crimes and have moved full force into solving community problems.

## CONCLUSION

For those that have patiently read this entire article looking for the information about the "Keystones Kops" your wait is now at an end. The tongue-in-cheek title was not meant as an insult to the men and women that continue to serve the law enforcement profession with honor, dedication and ingenuity. Rather, it is a nod to the increasing skill and professionalism with which modern police officers do their jobs. They continue to be tasked with a growing list of requirements and at each opportunity they rise to the challenge.

Officers are facing new tasks that did not exist even 15 years ago and employing skills that would take years to acquire and perfect through traditional experience. Skills that are also part of a comprehensive college education. It is through the repetition, experiment and learning offered by the higher education process that we start the journey to add extra to ordinary. No college program or trade school is a magic bullet for improved performance. However, a higher education has shown to have definitive benefits for those in police work, changing them from yesterday's "call takers" to tomorrow's exceptional problem solvers. Call it a keystone of modern police work.

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