



Post-print publicat a:

Vallès, L. (2017). There are no shortcuts to become a police officer. *Diggit magazine: digital culture, globalization, arts*. Disponible a: <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/there-are-no-shortcuts-become-police-officer>

There are no shortcuts to become a police officer

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All around Europe, governments rush into putting new police officers on the street. In this article Lola Valles argues that selecting and training new police officers is a serious business that cannot be rushed.

More police needed in Europe?

On 19-21 October 2016, hundreds of French police officers took their discontent to the streets with respect to violence against the police. It happened after a Molotov-cocktail attack on the police in a Paris suburb that left one officer in critical condition. Soon after, the French minister of the Interior promised an increase [of 9,200 police officers](#) in two years. Similarly German authorities in [Bavaria](#) pledged to recruit thousands of new police officers in a combination of security measures following a string of attacks last summer. But not only Bavaria, where the attacks took place, is planning a substantial increase in their numbers of police officers. We can see the phenomena spreading all over Germany; for instance, [North Rhine-Westphalia](#) plans to hire more new police officers this year than ever before and the [Bundespolizei](#), the German national police, has received funding for 3,000 new positions.

Can governments rush into putting thousands of new officers on the street without risking recruitment of unsuitable people? After years of underspending due to cuts in public expenditures, European governments are prone to invest in understaffed public services. This together with the War on Terror that puts security issues on the top of their agendas is leading governments to invest in substantial numbers of new police officers.

What do we need the police for?

Let's talk about the police mission in the first place: what do we need the police for? Police may be portrayed as defending the interest of the government they serve or as public servants that are going to help us when we encounter conflicts. Police are requested to set order when it is needed and to investigate and prevent crimes. But who is behind the uniform? Behind the anonymizing uniformity there are men and women who are given the authority to patrol the street, regulate traffic, assist citizens in emergency situations; furthermore, these people can use force, even a weapon, to perform their mission. Police officers perform sensitive and complex tasks. They work mostly in public under the scrutiny of citizens, and they are supposed to fulfill their task ethically without abusing the power they are given, nor discriminating any group in society... And yet, I sometimes wonder, what does it take to become a police officer? Well, it depends.

For instance, not so long ago in the province of Jujuy in the North of Argentina, there were no requirements at all for becoming a police officer. Candidates signed up and were just given their uniform and their gun and off they went on patrol. At the turn of the century, Argentina created a brand new Ministry of Security that among other things started to regulate police recruitment and training. In Argentina, such as in many other emerging democracies, democratization and state reform brought professionalization to their civil servants, among them the police. Vocational police training programs were developed to be consistent with the principles of democratic policing. In Jujuy, the [mission](#) of this new training is to reduce “*the gap between security organizations and civil society*” and to change the identity of recruits through training. Nowadays, education is considered one of the cornerstones of police professionalization and modernization. It has expanded greatly worldwide within the framework of vocational training.

Developments in police recruitment and education

In Europe, police education has shifted towards developing police academies from vocational training into accredited academic institutions within the university system in order to maximize the positive impact of police research and higher education on the police organization (del Barrio et al., 2009). The assumption is that police officers need more than vocational training of skills, and also that higher education will encourage reflective critical thinking. This in turn mitigates non-legalistic practices (Fekjaer, Petersson, & Thomassen, 2014). Changes include prolongation of initial education and upgrading to the academic level. This trend is also found in Australia, the USA and, more recently, Brazil and India, where attention has been given to the relationship between higher education and policing since the 1990s (Paterson, 2011). The consequences of these changes are not well known yet, although research has demonstrated the value of higher education on officers' attitudes. Policing needs to be continually enriched with critical, enquiring and challenging minds, and it seems that university education still provides the best way forward (Lee & Punch, 2004). An demonstration of the learning outcomes expected of higher education can be found in the Swedish police education program: “*Education should allow the students to acquire knowledge and competence to make independent and critical assessments, independently identify, formulate and solve problems, meet changes in the work environment, seek out and value scientific knowledge within the different areas of the education, follow and keep up with knowledge development in the various areas of the education.*” (Hove & Vallès, 2016)

The general picture is that the development of police training has been more influenced by academic contents, but that there are differences in national policies on the issue. In an ongoing study, Hove & Vallès (2016) have identified three police initial training models in Western Europe: the pure vocational model; a vocational model connected with the education system; and a higher education model. The length of training is related to these models ranging from 16 weeks in Anglo-Saxon countries, 10-12 months in Continental countries to 2-3 years in the Nordic countries. Most initial police training combines education at a campus and on the job training that integrates practical studies into the program through an internship period. This is the case for

most of the Nordic countries (though the way it is organized varies), while in Continental countries, internships are either very short or non-existent. In Anglo-Saxon countries one could say it is the other way around: the main component of education is on-the-job training. For instance, in the UK, new officers follow a two-year probation period under supervision of other police officers who act as mentors.

Police recruitment procedures have also become more professionalized and specific, and open criteria have been developed. Central government is responsible for recruitment, either individually or together with local authorities. It is interesting to notice that although there are big country differences in initial police education, the recruitment process is fairly similar in Western countries. All include a standard assessment with physical tests, medical tests and personal interviews. Differences can be found on a number of issues, such as age and height requirements, the sort of tests deployed, the professionals who perform the interviews and the influence of diversity policies to recruit more female and ethnic minority candidates.

Reflective thinking, knowledge transfer and skills learning are all part of police education, as are training on ethical values and adequate attitudes such as empathy or compassion. However, as a police officer stated during interviews with new police officers in Catalonia, *“more than a good training it is important to find people that fulfil certain conditions that make them suitable for this job”*. Some identity traits cannot be taught, and that is why selection is a key element.

Germany's shortcut

Let's go back to the German case. Germany is one of those European countries where police education moved from a vocational training to a higher education model; police officers have to follow a three-year Bachelor program. In 2016 different members of the government promised to quickly increase the number of police officers in the street, but could they achieve this? They have found a “shortcut” to this long period of education. Different German states are using the already existing [Wachpolizisten](#) (literally 'police guards') as a new, 'pseudo' police officer. But these armed guards only follow a three-month training. Even if they don't have the same functions as police officers, they can still interview persons, search them, find their identity, take them into custody and issue restraining orders. And they can use firearms.

The strategic position of police in society calls for good professionals that have to undergo a rigorous process of selection and proper education. Governments should first be able to attract good and diverse candidates (police services are in desperate need of more women and minorities). Second, they should be able to choose among a suitable number of candidates and perform a good selection. And last but not least, they should be able to educate new police officers not only to transfer their knowledge and improve their skills, but also be able to shape their new identity. Thus it is of paramount importance that shortcuts to recruit and educate new police officers are not used in contemporary Europe or elsewhere.

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