

**Principal  
Researcher(s) &  
Affiliation(s)**

Jairus Korpa

Advisors: Gurinder  
Mann, Greg Keenan,  
& Florence Daddey

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**Academic Motivation and the Effects on Students Career Aspirations: Before and After a Law Enforcement Studies Education at the *Justice Institute of British Columbia***

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**Introduction**

Education is one of the most important resources available to Canadians because it directly affects each person's future. With a post-secondary education, students can have an enhanced quality of life for themselves, their families, and their communities. Career choice and outcome for many professionals are dependent on education, which supports future development and improves interpersonal skills required for successful careers. The purpose of this study was to explore the influence that a law enforcement studies education, from the *Justice Institute of British Columbia* (JIBC), had on a student's career aspirations. Of the 123 student participants, 98% indicated they had specific career goals in public safety or law enforcement prior to a formal education at JIBC. However, after exposure to an education at JIBC, only 51% of the student participants indicated a change in their career goals.

**Methods**

This study was based on a mixed methods approach, where collected quantitative data supported a common influencer on career aspirations, specifically subject matter and education. Anonymous quantitative data was collected from 7 cohorts who were currently enrolled in both JIBC's Law Enforcement Studies Diploma (LESD) and Bachelor of Law Enforcement Studies (BLES) programs. The data retrieved was collected using a group administered questionnaire which consisted of 8 questions. The multiple-choice styled questions ranged from what program the student was currently enrolled in, what career goals the student had prior to their education at JIBC, and what career goals the students had after their exposure to a JIBC law enforcement studies education. The purpose for collecting quantitative data was to provide insight into whether a law enforcement education at JIBC influences change in career goals. The qualitative portion of this study explored existing academic studies as to why career goals and aspirations change over time.

## Results

From existing qualitative academic research, a number of common themes emerged that linked post-secondary education and career aspirations. Though motivations towards career aspirations or education varied, some common themes were apparent in most of the academic journals reviewed. The literature suggested 3 major influences on career aspirations: 1) psychological and social motivators; 2) subject matter and education; and 3) the glamorized influence through entertainment and media. The quantitative research determined that 66% of the (123) student participants had changed their career goals, following exposure to their law enforcement studies at JIBC. The top 3 agencies students selected included: *Vancouver Police Department*, *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (RCMP), and *Canada Border Services Agency* (CBSA). The most dramatic change in career choice amongst students was a 3.6% decline towards future careers with CBSA and the RCMP. The 2 most notable increases students selected was for *Metro Vancouver Transit Police* and the *undecided* category, which both increased by 2.6%. Totals further indicated that 57% of the students surveyed would be applying to their agency of choice within 6-months of their respective program completion. As a result, the primary research supported that 93% of the student participants agreed that their education at JIBC introduced them to new career opportunities.

## Discussion

Most career aspirations start with setting a goal, which some students have had since childhood, while others had set goals in their adult years. Students who make efficient use of their educational experiences are more likely to seek out the various career opportunities available to them. An integral goal amongst most post-secondary institutions is to teach students to think critically while searching for credibility and validity. The media glamorizes law enforcement professions, where policing appears to be exciting and adventurous. However, as many experienced police officers have expressed, the reality can be very different. Therefore, a post-secondary education taught by educated and experienced professionals will undoubtedly help clarify the myths presented in the media, such as in television and movies. The correlation between higher education and a successful career had emerged from the findings.

## Limitations

The predominant limitations of this study were related to the localized and specialized focus on the post-secondary institute, students, and subject matter. Though both the *Law Enforcement Studies Diploma* program and *Bachelor of Law Enforcement Studies* degree program are provincially recognized, policing and law enforcement is a specialized and unique culture. The students this profession attracts is far more focussed than other post-secondary institutions that offer broad program choices. With that in mind, it is difficult to determine whether this study could be applied to determine career aspirations at other post-secondary institutions, though the qualitative data applied across the board. Another limitation of this study was related to the questionnaire formatting and clarity of instructions which

created some degree of inaccuracy. All of the questions indicated to provide only one answer per question, however 37% of the questionnaires returned included multiple responses for questions 4 and 7. Questions 4 and 7 were related to the student's primary choice of law enforcement agency prior to educational exposure and after educational exposure. This error undoubtedly contributed to higher counts with some agencies over others. With multiple agencies selected on 37% of the questionnaires, it was not possible to determine which agency was the student's first or primary choice, therefore it was decided that every agency selected was included into the final totals. This calculation undoubtedly skewed the accuracy of chosen agencies by the student sample.

## Conclusions

The findings indicated that the motivation to work through the challenges of achieving one's career goals may be intrinsic, extrinsic, or a combination of both. Ascencio (2018) suggested, in order to organize and sustain the behaviour and actions that lead to a successful outcome, it is essential to set goals. A law enforcement education is specialized to prepare students for a professional career in policing and public safety. Unlike general studies, where it is relatively easy to change majors, a law enforcement education is specific towards a unique profession. Indecision can create unnecessary anxiety and challenges, if the student wants to change focus. It is encouraged that families and students research their prospective careers before they enrol, as misinformation of the criminal justice system is prevalent. Future research into motivations towards specialized careers may be explored at post-secondary institutions that offer specialized studies. This current study focused on law enforcement studies students at JIBC. This research may be further expanded upon with similar studies of students within the *School of Public Safety* and the *School of Health, Community, and Social Justice* at the *Justice Institute of British Columbia*.

## Key References

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