THE INFLUENCE OF COLLECTIVE BARGAINING ON LARGE POLICE AGENCY SALARIES: 1990-2000

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ABSTRACT: Collective bargaining between police management and unions is an important process that determines many aspects of police work, particularly the monetary benefits for line officers like salary and fringe benefits. Working with limited budgets, police administrators who engage in collective bargaining are obligated to negotiate with union representatives over wage benefits while attempting to maintain adequate financial resources toward other police operations. Though students of policing learn that police unions try very hard to increase economic reward for their members there is limited research on the effectiveness of their efforts. Since economic benefits are the primary focus of police unions, it is important; therefore, to evaluate the impact that collective bargaining has on salaries earned by police personnel. This study examines this issue by combining four waves of the Law Enforcement Management and Administration Statistics for the period 1990-2000. Pooled time series analyses reveal that large organizations that engaged in collective bargaining had higher minimum wages for officers during the period. As predicted, collective bargaining did not affect minimum chief’s salaries.

INTRODUCTION

Employee representation by unions has become a common practice for the police profession. For example, recent data from the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics survey show

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that police officers are represented by unions in over 70% of all large municipal police departments employing 100 officers or more (Reaves & Goldberg, 1999). A police union, according to Bennett and Hess (2001), is an organization formed by the members of police employees who volunteer to participate. Founded in 1915, for example, the Fraternal Order of Police (2005) notes, “we are committed to improving the working conditions of law enforcement officers and the safety of those who we serve through education, legislation, information, community involvement, and employee representation” (p. 1).

The most important function of a union is the representation of its members in collective bargaining. In the process of collective bargaining, employer and employee union representatives negotiate over two primary areas of focus: conditions of employment and employees’ economic benefits such as wages, salaries, and working hours (Bell, 1981). Collective bargaining introduces an employee advocate to the process who represents workers interest in fiscal decision-making. Negotiations take on the character of intense and tough “battles” between management and public employee unions to settle issues connected primarily to the economic interests of employees (Bell, 1981; Chandler & Gely, 1995; Flammang, 1986; Walker, 1977; Widenor, 1991).

As far as the effect of collective bargaining on police salaries is concerned, we were unable to find any published study that examined data collected after the late 1980s. This lack of contemporary research may be due, in part, to the fact that the vast majority of empirical research using data from the 1970s and 1980s show that the collective bargaining process often benefited police salaries and hourly wages (Chandler & Gely, 1995; Feuille & Delaney, 1986; Gallagher & Veglahn 1987; Hall & Vanderporten, 1977; O’Brien, 1994). An exception is O’Brien (1996) who found no significant effect between collective bargaining and average hourly wage.

In the meantime, research also demonstrates that the effect of the strength of the union’s bargaining position with management is conditioned by measures of local economic conditions such as medium income, per capita income, average wages, and unemployment rates (Chandler & Gely, 1995; Feuille & Delaney, 1986; Hall & Vanderporten, 1977; Juris & Feuille, 1973; O’Brien, 1994). These factors often influence the city’s tax base and police budgets, or the ability to pay high salaries. Changing economic factors from a recession in the early 1990s to an unprecedented economic boom in the latter years make this period an interesting time to study wage negotiations for police (Carroll, 2000).

In addition, there are several methodological weaknesses common to all previous research studies on the relationship between collective