

From Remote Learning to Police Academy Readiness: Developmental and Instructional Implications of COVID-Era Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered educational experiences through prolonged reliance on remote learning and widespread disruption of traditional classroom instruction. Although necessary as a public health response, remote education affected not only academic achievement but also the development of self-regulation, interpersonal communication, accountability, and stress tolerance. As students educated during the pandemic enter professions that require high levels of discipline, decision-making, and professional judgment, questions have emerged about their preparedness for structured professional training. Despite extensive research documenting pandemic-related learning loss across primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, relatively little research has examined how these educational disruptions may affect performance in police training.

This article draws on research from education, developmental psychology, adult learning theory, and policing to examine how COVID-era educational experiences may influence early performance in police academies. Particular attention is given to academic preparedness, self-regulated learning, interpersonal competence, emotional regulation, stress tolerance, and decision-making within highly structured training environments. The analysis integrates existing empirical evidence with instructor observations to develop a conceptual framework explaining how pandemic-era educational experiences may affect recruit adaptation during academy training.

The article concludes that maintaining rigorous training standards is essential. Instructional strategies that emphasize structured accountability, scenario-based learning, progressive stress exposure, and development of communication skills may improve recruits' transition into academy training. By extending pandemic learning-loss research into law enforcement education, this article contributes to the emerging literature on workforce preparedness. It offers practical recommendations for police academy instructors seeking to develop resilient, competent, and professionally prepared officers in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote learning, police academy, recruit preparedness, self-regulated learning, adult learning, decision-making, police education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic produced one of the most significant disruptions to education in modern history. Beginning in early 2020, schools, colleges, and universities across the United States rapidly transitioned from traditional classroom instruction to remote learning in response to public health concerns. Although

these measures were implemented as an emergency necessity, the duration and scale of remote instruction fundamentally altered how millions of students learned, interacted with instructors, collaborated with peers, and developed the academic and behavioral skills necessary for future educational and professional success. Research conducted during the years following the pandemic consistently documents measurable declines in academic achievement, particularly in reading and mathematics, while also identifying broader disruptions in student engagement, motivation, and educational attainment (Engzell et al., 2021; Jakubowski et al., 2025; Kuhfeld et al., 2023; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

The effects of pandemic-era education extend beyond standardized test scores. Traditional classroom environments provide structured opportunities for students to develop self-regulation, time management, interpersonal communication, collaborative problem-solving, and resilience when confronted with academic challenges. During prolonged periods of remote instruction, many of these developmental experiences were reduced or fundamentally altered. Students often completed coursework in relative isolation, received greater flexibility regarding attendance and assignment deadlines, and experienced fewer opportunities for direct interaction with instructors and classmates. Although these accommodations were appropriate responses to an unprecedented public health emergency, researchers have increasingly questioned how prolonged disruption of structured educational environments may influence students' readiness for later academic and professional demands (OECD, 2023).

These concerns are particularly relevant for professions that require rapid adaptation to highly structured, performance-oriented training environments. Police academies represent a distinctive form of professional education characterized by intensive academic instruction, physical training, scenario-based exercises, continuous evaluation, and strict standards of accountability. Unlike many postsecondary educational settings, police academies require recruits to integrate legal knowledge, ethical reasoning, interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, and decision-making while operating under significant time pressure and evaluative stress. Success depends not only on cognitive ability but also on disciplined study habits, self-regulated learning, resilience, and the capacity to perform effectively within a structured organizational culture.

Adult learning theory suggests that successful education depends upon learners assuming increasing responsibility for their own preparation while actively integrating prior experiences into new learning environments (Knowles et al., 2015). Similarly, research on self-regulated learning emphasizes that effective students monitor their own progress, manage time effectively, adapt study strategies, and respond constructively to performance feedback (Zimmerman, 2002). These competencies are particularly important within police academies, where recruits must quickly adapt to demanding instructional expectations while demonstrating consistent academic and physical performance. If opportunities to develop these competencies were interrupted during pandemic-era education, some recruits may experience transitional challenges during the early stages of academy training.

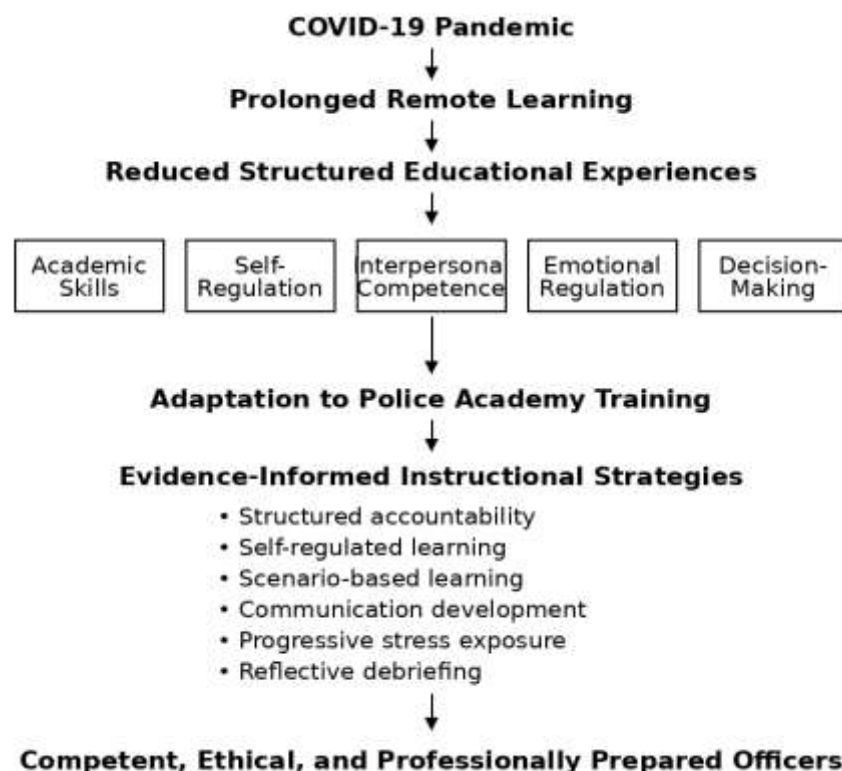
Informal observations reported by academy instructional staff have suggested that some recruits whose education occurred during the pandemic initially demonstrate greater difficulty adapting to structured accountability, interpersonal communication, academic writing, and high-pressure decision-making. Although these observations do not establish causal relationships, they are consistent with broader educational and developmental research documenting the long-term effects of prolonged remote learning. These observations raise important questions regarding how police academies can maintain rigorous performance standards while recognizing the educational experiences from which many current recruits

emerge.

Although academic research has examined learning loss across primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, comparatively little research has examined how pandemic-related educational disruption may influence training in police academies. This represents an important gap within criminal justice education because police academies function not only as instructional institutions but also as mechanisms of socialization in which recruits develop the knowledge, behaviors, and judgment expected of police officers. Understanding how prior educational experiences influence adjustment to these environments may help academies design instructional strategies that maintain standards while facilitating recruits' successful transition into police training.

This article addresses that gap by reviewing interdisciplinary research from education, developmental psychology, adult learning theory, self-regulated learning, and policing. Rather than arguing that pandemic-era education permanently diminished recruit capability, the article proposes a conceptual framework suggesting that educational disruption may have altered the pace and nature of adaptation to structured police training. The discussion examines five interrelated domains of academy preparedness, academic skill development, self-regulation, interpersonal competence, emotional regulation, and decision-making, and concludes by identifying instructional strategies that may strengthen recruit success while maintaining high academic and performance standards. The relationships discussed throughout this article are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework Linking COVID-Era Educational Disruption to Police Academy Preparedness



Note. This conceptual framework summarizes the relationships proposed in this article. Educational disruption associated with prolonged remote learning may affect five developmental domains that

collectively influence recruits' adaptation to police academy training. The framework is conceptual and is intended to guide future empirical research.

Remote Learning and Academic Skill Development

A substantial body of research has documented measurable declines in academic achievement associated with pandemic-era school closures and prolonged reliance on remote learning. International studies, national assessments, and large-scale longitudinal analyses consistently report reductions in reading comprehension, mathematics proficiency, and overall academic growth among students whose education was interrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Engzell et al., 2021; Jakubowski et al., 2025; Kuhfeld et al., 2023; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Although the magnitude of learning loss varied across age groups and educational systems, the collective evidence suggests that many students entered adulthood with gaps in foundational academic skills that traditionally support success in higher education and vocational training.

These findings represent more than temporary declines in standardized test performance. Reading comprehension, analytical writing, sustained attention, and critical thinking develop through repeated exposure to increasingly complex academic tasks. During prolonged periods of remote instruction, opportunities to reinforce these competencies were often reduced by fragmented learning schedules, diminished classroom interaction, modified grading practices, and inconsistent instructional engagement. While many students demonstrated remarkable adaptability under difficult circumstances, educational researchers have cautioned that disruptions in sustained academic practice may influence later educational and occupational performance (OECD, 2023).

Police academies place substantial academic demands on recruits from the first weeks of training. Recruits must interpret criminal statutes, constitutional principles, departmental policies, investigative procedures, and tactical skills while simultaneously mastering a large volume of new information within compressed instructional timelines. Unlike many traditional academic environments, academy evaluations often require recruits not only to recall information accurately but also to apply legal principles, justify decisions, and communicate their reasoning under significant time pressure.

Strong reading comprehension is particularly important because recruits are expected to interpret statutory language, analyze legal scenarios, and distinguish subtle differences among policies and procedures that may have significant operational and legal consequences. Similarly, effective writing skills are essential for preparing reports, documenting investigations, articulating probable cause, and communicating observations clearly and objectively. Deficiencies in these foundational competencies may therefore influence performance across many areas of academy instruction rather than within isolated classroom assignments.

Learning theory further suggests that developing complex professional knowledge depends upon continuous reinforcement and progressively increasing cognitive challenge. Adult students build new knowledge by integrating prior educational experiences with increasingly sophisticated applications (Knowles et al., 2015). When foundational academic skills have been unevenly reinforced, recruits may require additional time and structured instructional support before demonstrating the level of analytical reasoning expected within academy training. These transitional challenges are best understood as differences in educational preparation rather than diminished intellectual ability.

Pandemic-era instructional accommodations, including flexible attendance policies, extended assignment deadlines, modified grading practices, and alternative assessment methods, were appropriate responses to

extraordinary public health conditions (OECD, 2023). Nevertheless, these modifications may also have reduced students' exposure to academic accountability and performance expectations. Police academies operate under markedly different conditions. Attendance requirements are strict; assignments must be completed within prescribed timelines; performance deficiencies receive immediate corrective feedback; and recruits are expected to demonstrate continuous progress across academic, physical, and practical application exercises. The transition from flexible educational environments to highly structured professional training may therefore represent a significant adjustment for some recruits.

Informal observations reported by academy instructional staff suggest that some recruits educated during the pandemic initially require additional guidance in organizing study routines, managing demanding reading assignments, and producing clear, well-reasoned written work under time constraints. Although these observations remain largely anecdotal and should not be interpreted as evidence of widespread deficiencies, they are broadly consistent with the educational literature documenting the long-term effects of disrupted academic engagement. Collectively, the evidence suggests that early academy performance may reflect differences in prior educational experience rather than differences in overall learning potential. Recognizing these transitional challenges has important implications for police academy instruction. Maintaining rigorous academic standards remains essential to preparing competent police officers. At the same time, instructional strategies that reinforce reading comprehension, analytical writing, structured study habits, and guided application of legal principles may help recruits adapt more effectively to the demanding academic expectations of police training without compromising training quality or performance standards.

Self-Regulation, Accountability, and Learning Habits

Recruits' ability to regulate their own learning is a fundamental predictor of academic and professional success. Self-regulation encompasses the capacity to establish goals, manage time effectively, maintain attention, monitor personal performance, and modify learning strategies in response to feedback (Zimmerman, 2002). These competencies are not natural but develop gradually through repeated exposure to structured educational environments that reinforce accountability, consistent expectations, and personal responsibility. Traditional classrooms provide many of these opportunities by requiring students to adhere to schedules, complete assignments within prescribed deadlines, participate in collaborative learning activities, and respond to regular instructor evaluations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, prolonged reliance on remote instruction substantially altered these developmental experiences. Students frequently completed coursework independently, often with greater flexibility regarding attendance, assignment deadlines, and classroom participation. Although these accommodations were appropriate responses to extraordinary public health circumstances, they also reduced many of the external structures that reinforce effective learning habits. Reports published during the pandemic documented declines in attendance, inconsistent participation, reduced motivation, and increased academic disengagement among many students (Dorn et al., 2020). Subsequent research suggests that some of these patterns persisted beyond the return to traditional classroom instruction (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; OECD, 2023).

The educational consequences of these changes extend beyond academic achievement alone. Self-regulated students actively organize their study schedules, monitor their understanding of course material, seek assistance when necessary, and respond constructively to corrective feedback. Students who had fewer opportunities to develop these skills during prolonged remote learning may require additional time

to establish effective study routines when entering highly structured training environments. Importantly, these transitional limitations should not be interpreted as evidence of reduced motivation or diminished intellectual ability. Rather, they may reflect differences in the educational experiences through which learning habits and personal accountability are developed.

Police academies rely heavily on self-regulated learning. Although instructors provide structured guidance and evaluations, recruits are expected to assume responsibility for mastering extensive volumes of legal doctrine, departmental policies, report-writing requirements, tactical procedures, and physical performance standards. Independent study, role-plays, teach-backs, physical conditioning, and preparation for written examinations and scenario-based evaluations supplement daily instruction. Success therefore depends not only upon cognitive ability but also upon disciplined learning habits, personal organization, and sustained academic engagement.

Adult learning theory similarly emphasizes that effective professional education requires learners to assume increasing responsibility for directing their own learning while integrating previous experiences into new instructional settings (Knowles et al., 2015). Police academy training illustrates this educational model. Recruits are expected to evaluate their own performance, identify areas requiring improvement, and actively incorporate instructor feedback into subsequent performance. Individuals who have had fewer opportunities to develop these habits may initially experience greater difficulty adapting to the pace and expectations of academy instruction.

These findings have important implications for police academy instruction. Reinforcing self-regulated learning early in academy training may improve recruit adaptation without lowering academic expectations. Instructional practices such as structured study plans, clearly defined performance milestones, guided reflection following examinations and scenarios, regular formative feedback, and explicit instruction in effective learning strategies may accelerate the development of independent learning behaviors. These approaches maintain rigorous performance standards while equipping recruits with the organizational skills necessary to succeed in demanding training environments.

Ultimately, police officers must demonstrate disciplined judgment, personal accountability, and continuous professional learning throughout their careers. Police academies therefore serve not only as institutions for transferring knowledge but also as environments in which recruits develop the self-regulatory habits essential for long-term professional competence. Understanding how pandemic-era educational experiences may have influenced the development of these habits enables academy instructors to design instructional interventions that strengthen recruit success while maintaining the rigorous standards expected of the policing profession.

Interpersonal Skill Development and Social Learning

Interpersonal competence develops through repeated face-to-face interaction with peers, instructors, supervisors, and members of the community. Traditional educational environments provide students with opportunities to practice interpersonal communication, collaborative problem-solving, conflict resolution, leadership, and professional presentation skills. Classroom discussions, group projects, extracurricular activities, and informal peer interactions all contribute to the development of social confidence and communication skills that extend well beyond academic achievement.

Developmental psychology suggests that late adolescence and emerging adulthood represent particularly important periods for acquiring interpersonal competence and establishing professional identity. Arnett (2000) describes emerging adulthood as a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration,

increasing independence, and expanding social responsibilities. During this period, individuals refine their communication skills, develop emotional maturity, and learn to navigate increasingly complex interpersonal relationships. These experiences serve as important foundations for later occupational performance, particularly in professions that require frequent interaction with the public.

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially altered many of these developmental experiences. Remote instruction reduced daily face-to-face interaction with classmates and instructors, while public health restrictions limited participation in extracurricular activities, including team sports, internships, volunteer work, and other social environments that foster interpersonal growth. Although virtual communication allowed educational continuity, it could not fully replace the spontaneous social interactions, collaborative learning, and immediate interpersonal feedback characteristic of traditional classroom settings.

Research conducted during and following the pandemic documented increased levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation among adolescents and young adults (Madigan et al., 2023; Racine et al., 2021). These findings do not suggest that an entire generation experienced impaired social development. Rather, they indicate that many students encountered fewer opportunities to practice the interpersonal behaviors that support confidence, assertiveness, conflict management, and collaborative communication. Consequently, some individuals entering professional training may require additional experience adapting to highly interactive learning environments after prolonged periods of educational isolation.

These considerations are particularly relevant within police academies because policing is fundamentally a people business. Police officers communicate with victims, witnesses, suspects, community members, supervisors, attorneys, and other officers. Effective policing depends not only on legal knowledge but also on the ability to establish rapport, communicate clearly under stress, resolve conflicts professionally, exercise procedural justice, and demonstrate confidence during rapidly evolving encounters. Many of these competencies begin developing during academy instruction through classroom participation, scenario-based exercises, defensive tactics training, and daily interaction with instructors and peers.

Professional socialization also represents a central objective of police academy education. Beyond transmitting technical knowledge and procedural skills, academies introduce recruits to the expectations, values, communication styles, and behavioral norms of the policing profession. Recruits learn how to accept constructive criticism, function effectively within teams, demonstrate professional bearing, and communicate with confidence while operating within a disciplined organizational environment. These social learning experiences are essential components of preparing recruits for the rigors of field performance.

Informal observations reported by academy instructional staff suggest that some recruits educated during the pandemic initially demonstrate hesitation during classroom discussions, reduced confidence in oral presentations, and uncertainty when articulating decisions during scenario-based evaluations. Others may initially require additional coaching in communication or assertive interaction during practical exercises. Although these observations remain anecdotal and should not be interpreted as evidence of widespread deficiencies, they are consistent with broader educational and developmental literature describing the effects of prolonged social disruption during the pandemic.

Police academies are uniquely positioned to reinforce interpersonal competence through structured instructional design. Frequent scenario-based training, small-group problem-solving exercises, peer teaching, instructor-led debriefings, report-writing critiques, and communication-focused role-playing provide recruits with repeated opportunities to strengthen verbal communication, collaborative decision-making, and professional confidence. These instructional strategies not only reinforce academy learning

objectives but also accelerate professional socialization, preparing recruits for the interpersonal demands of today's policing.

Effective communication is a foundational requirement of modern policing. Recognizing that some recruits may enter academy training with fewer opportunities for interpersonal development, instructors can design educational experiences that strengthen communication, confidence, and collaboration while maintaining the rigorous professional standards expected of law enforcement officers.

Emotional Regulation and Stress Tolerance

Emotional regulation and stress tolerance are fundamental competencies for effective police performance. Police officers routinely encounter situations involving uncertainty, conflict, physical danger, and rapidly evolving circumstances that require calm, deliberate judgment under pressure. Police academies, therefore, intentionally expose recruits to progressively demanding physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges designed to develop resilience and prepare them for operational decision-making. Rather than serving as obstacles to learning, these controlled stressors are intended to strengthen recruits' ability to regulate emotions, maintain situational awareness, and perform effectively in high-pressure environments. Research demonstrates that moderate, progressively increasing stress exposure can improve performance by enhancing cognitive adaptation, confidence, and resilience when accompanied by appropriate instruction and recovery (Morgan et al., 2001). Similarly, policing research has long recognized that academy training serves not only to transfer knowledge but also to condition recruits to function effectively under demanding field conditions (Violanti et al., 2017). Through physical training, timed evaluations, scenario-based exercises, defensive tactics, firearms qualification, and performance assessments, recruits gradually develop the emotional control necessary to make sound decisions while experiencing physiological and psychological stress.

However, the development of emotional regulation begins long before recruits enter the academy. Participation in athletics, extracurricular organizations, competitive academic activities, employment, military service, and other structured environments provides opportunities to experience challenge, receive constructive criticism, recover from setbacks, and develop perseverance. These experiences contribute to resilience by teaching individuals to manage frustration, maintain motivation, and continue performing despite adversity.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of these developmental opportunities. Public health restrictions led to the cancellation or modification of organized sports, extracurricular programs, internships, and other structured activities that regularly expose young adults to performance pressure and interpersonal accountability. At the same time, remote learning reduced the immediate consequences of missed deadlines, reduced classroom participation, and academic setbacks. Although these accommodations were appropriate responses to extraordinary circumstances, they may also have limited some students' opportunities to practice coping with sustained performance-related stress.

Systematic reviews conducted following the pandemic documented substantial reductions in physical activity among adolescents and young adults, including reduced participation in organized activities (Stockwell et al., 2021; Wunsch et al., 2022). Additional research reported increases in anxiety and psychological distress during the same period (Madigan et al., 2023; Racine et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings suggest that many students experienced fewer opportunities to develop resilience through repeated exposure to structured challenge during an important period of psychological and social development.

Within police academies, these developmental differences may become apparent when recruits encounter the intensity of academy training. Informal observations by academy instructional staff suggest that some pandemic-educated recruits exhibit heightened emotional responses to corrective feedback, frustration after performance setbacks, and increased anxiety during timed practical exercises. Others may require additional encouragement to recover from early failures or repeated coaching before demonstrating confidence under evaluative conditions.

Importantly, these reactions should not be interpreted as evidence of reduced performance. Emotional regulation is a skill that can be strengthened through repeated experience, deliberate practice, and supportive instruction. Academy training is specifically designed to facilitate this development by exposing recruits to progressively more complex and demanding situations while providing immediate coaching, corrective feedback, and opportunities for continued improvement.

Problem-based learning is one of the most effective methods for developing emotional regulation within police training. Realistic scenarios require recruits to apply legal knowledge, communicate effectively, solve problems collaboratively, and make defensible decisions while under elevated physiological and psychological stress. Structured debriefings following these exercises allow recruits to reflect on their performance, identify effective coping strategies, and build confidence through guided learning. As recruits accumulate successful experiences under progressively challenging conditions, emotional regulation becomes increasingly automatic and resilient.

These findings have important implications for police academy instruction. Maintaining rigorous performance expectations remains essential because resilience develops through successfully overcoming challenges rather than avoiding them. At the same time, instructors may enhance recruit adaptation by progressively increasing training complexity, providing timely and constructive feedback, and encouraging reflective learning. These instructional approaches preserve academy standards while strengthening the emotional resilience required for effective policing.

Ultimately, emotional regulation is not merely a personal characteristic but a professional competency that directly influences officer safety, public trust, and decision quality. Understanding how pandemic-era educational experiences may have altered opportunities for stress conditioning enables police academies to design instructional experiences that deliberately strengthen resilience while preparing recruits for the realities of police work.

Decision-Making Within Structured Authority

Effective police decision-making requires far more than knowledge of criminal law or departmental policy. Officers must rapidly interpret evolving situations, evaluate legal and ethical considerations, assess risk, communicate effectively, and select appropriate courses of action under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure. These decisions frequently occur in dynamic environments where incomplete information, competing priorities, and elevated stress increase cognitive demands. Professional judgment, therefore, develops not only through classroom instruction but also through repeated experience applying knowledge within structured, consequence-based training environments.

Decision-making research emphasizes that expertise develops through deliberate practice and repeated exposure to realistic situations rather than through memorization alone. Klein (1998) argues that experienced decision-makers rely upon pattern recognition developed through repeated encounters with similar situations, allowing them to recognize critical cues, anticipate consequences, and respond efficiently under pressure. Scenario-based instruction accelerates pattern recognition by repeatedly

exposing recruits to realistic situations that require integration of legal knowledge, communication, and tactical judgment. Police academy training reflects this principle by progressively exposing recruits to increasingly complex scenarios that require them to integrate legal knowledge, tactical considerations, communication skills, and ethical reasoning while operating within carefully controlled learning environments.

Effective decision-making is the cumulative product of the developmental competencies discussed throughout this article. For example, reading comprehension supports accurate interpretation of statutes and departmental policy. Self-regulated learning enables recruits to prepare effectively and apply instructor feedback. Interpersonal skills facilitate communication, de-escalation, and teamwork. Emotional regulation allows recruits to remain composed while evaluating rapidly changing circumstances. Collectively, these competencies form the foundation upon which sound professional judgment is developed.

Informal observations by academy instructional staff suggest that some pandemic-educated recruits initially hesitate when responding to ambiguous scenarios or when explaining the reasoning behind their decisions during classroom discussions and practical exercises. Rather than reflecting inadequate intellectual ability, these behaviors may represent transitional differences in how knowledge is applied within high-accountability environments. As recruits receive repeated opportunities to participate in scenario-based instruction, accept corrective feedback, and reflect upon their performance, decision confidence and judgment frequently improve.

Police academies intentionally cultivate professional decision-making through progressively challenging instructional experiences. Scenario-based exercises, tactical simulations, case studies, role-playing, and facilitated after-action debriefings require recruits to synthesize legal principles, ethical obligations, communication strategies, and tactical considerations while operating under realistic constraints. These instructional methods encourage recruits to move beyond memorization toward analytical reasoning, adaptive thinking, and defensible professional judgment.

Educational research suggests that learning is strengthened when students actively apply knowledge to authentic problems rather than passively receiving information. Adult learners retain knowledge more effectively when instruction is directly connected to realistic professional tasks and reinforced through immediate feedback and guided reflection (Knowles et al., 2015). This educational approach aligns closely with contemporary police academy instruction, where practical application and reflective learning increasingly complement traditional lecture-based methods.

Maintaining rigorous training expectations remains essential because decision-making competence develops through repeated practice under realistic conditions. Academy instructors can strengthen this development by designing increasingly complex scenarios, encouraging recruits to articulate the legal and ethical basis for their decisions, providing structured feedback during debriefings, and emphasizing reflective learning following both successful and unsuccessful performances. These instructional strategies preserve high standards while supporting the gradual development of confident, competent decision-makers.

Ultimately, effective police decision-making is the product of cumulative educational, developmental, and professional experiences. Academic knowledge, emotional regulation, interpersonal competence, resilience, and structured practice collectively shape an officer's capacity to make sound judgments under pressure. Understanding how pandemic-era educational experiences may have influenced these developmental pathways enables police academies to better prepare recruits for the complex decision-

making demands of contemporary policing while maintaining the rigorous standards necessary to protect both officers and the communities they serve.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the arguments presented in this article. First, this study is conceptual rather than empirical. It does not present original survey data, experimental findings, or longitudinal analyses directly linking COVID-era remote learning to police academy performance. Instead, the article evaluates established research from education, developmental psychology, adult learning theory, and policing to develop a conceptual framework for understanding pandemic-related educational disruption within the context of police academy preparedness.

Second, the relationship between remote learning and recruit performance should not be interpreted as causal. Educational outcomes are shaped by several interacting factors, including socioeconomic conditions, family support, school resources, individual motivation, prior educational achievement, physical and mental health, employment history, and life experiences. Likewise, police academy success is influenced by cognitive ability, physical fitness, emotional resilience, instructor quality, academy culture, and individual commitment. Pandemic-era education represents only one of the factors that may contribute to recruit adaptation within structured professional training environments.

Third, the instructor observations discussed throughout this article are anecdotal and have not been systematically evaluated through empirical research. Thus, they should be viewed as generating assumptions for future investigation rather than supporting definitive conclusions.

Despite these limitations, conceptual analyses serve an important role in advancing future research. The bulk of research on pandemic learning loss has focused on primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, while comparatively little attention has been given to professional training. This article offers a framework that may guide future research and instructional development within criminal justice education.

Future Research

Finally, qualitative interviews with recruits, academy instructors, and field training officers could examine how pandemic-era educational experiences influence adaptation during academy training and the transition to field performance. Longitudinal studies following recruits through the Field Training Officer (FTO) program and the early years of their careers could evaluate whether pandemic-era educational experiences are associated with differences in report-writing quality, communication effectiveness, decision-making confidence, and performance evaluations. This research would help determine whether transitional challenges seen during academy training represent temporary adaptation differences or have longer-term implications. Understanding these relationships would also help identify instructional practices that not only improve academy success but also contribute to the development of competent, ethical, and resilient officers throughout the early stages of their careers.

Implications for Police Academy Instruction

The educational disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic should not be used as justification for lowering police academy standards. Law enforcement remains a profession in which officer safety, public trust, constitutional policing, and effective decision-making depend upon rigorous preparation and demonstrated competence. The findings presented in this article instead suggest that prolonged reliance

on remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered students' social and educational development. As a result, police academies may benefit from developing instructional strategies that address the transition and educational needs of recruits.

Beyond technical instruction, academy training serves as the primary process through which recruits internalize the norms, values, ethics, communication, and decision-making expectations of the policing profession. This socialization occurs through daily interactions with instructors and peers, evaluative feedback, and organizational culture. The educational disruptions experienced prior to academy entry may therefore influence not only academic adaptation but also the pace at which recruits adjust to professional expectations.

One area deserving increased emphasis is the development of self-regulated learning skills. Although recruits are ultimately responsible for their own preparation, academy instructors can facilitate successful adaptation by clearly communicating study expectations, teaching effective note-taking and study techniques, establishing structured learning milestones, and providing frequent feedback during the early weeks of training. Helping recruits develop effective learning habits early may improve academic performance while fostering independence.

Written communication skills also warrant instructional emphasis. Police officers are expected to produce accurate, objective, and legally defensible reports. Structured writing assignments accompanied by detailed instructor feedback can reinforce analytical reasoning, improve written articulation, and strengthen recruits' ability to communicate clearly under stress. Frequent opportunities to write, revise, and receive constructive feedback encourage continual improvement while reinforcing professional standards.

Scenario-based learning should remain the cornerstone of academy instruction because it integrates many of the competencies discussed throughout this article. Well-designed scenarios require recruits to synthesize legal knowledge, interpersonal communication, ethical reasoning, tactical decision-making, and emotional regulation within realistic operational contexts. Progressive increases in scenario complexity enable recruits to build confidence while developing the judgment and resilience necessary for field performance. Equally important are structured debriefings following each exercise, during which instructors guide recruits in reflecting on their decisions, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and developing strategies for future improvement.

Academies may also benefit from placing greater emphasis on communication and collaborative learning throughout the curriculum. Small-group problem-solving exercises, guided classroom discussions, peer instruction, and practical role-playing activities encourage recruits to articulate their reasoning, defend their decisions professionally, and learn from others' perspectives. These instructional methods strengthen interpersonal competence while reinforcing the teamwork essential to effective policing.

Instructional approaches should also recognize that resilience develops through progressive challenge rather than through the avoidance of stress. Carefully sequenced physical training, increasingly demanding scenario-based exercises, realistic performance evaluations, and timely corrective feedback help recruits build confidence as they adapt to the pressures inherent in police work. Maintaining rigorous standards while providing consistent coaching encourages perseverance and reinforces the professional expectation that competence is achieved through disciplined practice and continuous improvement.

These recommendations are consistent with contemporary principles of adult learning, which emphasize active participation, realistic application, immediate feedback, and reflective practice as essential components of professional education (Knowles et al., 2015). Rather than viewing recruits as passive

recipients of information, academy instruction should encourage learners to assume increasing responsibility for their own development while applying knowledge to authentic policing problems. Such instructional approaches prepare recruits not only to succeed during academy training but also to continue learning throughout their professional careers.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped education in ways extending well beyond temporary declines in academic achievement. Prolonged reliance on remote instruction altered many students' opportunities to develop the academic habits, self-regulatory skills, interpersonal competence, emotional resilience, and structured decision-making experiences that traditionally emerge through sustained participation in face-to-face educational environments. Although these educational adaptations were implemented as necessary public health measures, their long-term implications continue to emerge as pandemic-educated students enter professions characterized by rigorous performance expectations and structured professional training. Police academies represent one of the first environments in which many young adults encounter sustained academic accountability, progressive stress exposure, continuous performance evaluation, and the expectation that sound professional judgment must be demonstrated under demanding conditions. Consequently, some transitional challenges observed during academy training may reflect differences in educational preparation rather than differences in individual ability or commitment. Recognizing this distinction enables academy leaders and instructors to interpret early performance within a broader developmental context while upholding the rigorous standards required for effective policing.

This article has argued that pandemic-era educational disruption may influence five interrelated dimensions of recruit preparedness: academic skill development, self-regulated learning, interpersonal competence, emotional regulation, and decision-making. Drawing upon research from education, developmental psychology, adult learning, and policing, a conceptual framework was developed to explain how these domains collectively shape adaptation to professional police training. Although empirical research is needed to evaluate the proposed relationships, the framework provides a foundation for future investigation and offers practical guidance for instructional design within police academies.

The findings presented here reinforce an important principle of professional education: maintaining high standards and providing effective instructional support are complementary, not competing, objectives. Rigorous expectations remain essential because public safety depends upon officers who can think critically, communicate effectively, regulate emotions, and exercise sound judgment under pressure. At the same time, evidence-informed instructional practices—including explicit reinforcement of self-regulated learning, structured writing instruction, progressive scenario-based training, communication development, and reflective performance feedback—may facilitate successful adaptation while preserving the integrity of academy training.

More broadly, the implications of this analysis extend beyond police education. As pandemic-educated cohorts continue entering professions that demand disciplined judgment, ethical decision-making, and resilience under pressure, educators and training organizations across multiple disciplines may encounter similar transitional challenges. Understanding the developmental context from which these learners emerge allows professional educators to design instructional strategies that strengthen competence without compromising standards.

Ultimately, the lasting legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic for police education may not be defined by learning loss itself, but by how effectively academies respond to the changing educational experiences of

the recruits they serve. Institutions that preserve rigorous standards while deliberately strengthening academic preparation, resilience, communication, and professional judgment will be best positioned to develop officers capable of meeting the increasingly complex demands of contemporary policing. Police academies thereby reaffirm their central mission: preparing competent, ethical, and adaptable professionals who are equipped to serve their communities with confidence, sound judgment, and integrity. More than preparing recruits for graduation, academies establish the professional foundations upon which safe, ethical, and effective policing depends.

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