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College Students' Perceptions of Law Enforcement and Legal Careers

Courtney Alley

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By

Courtney Alley

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College of Arts and Sciences

East Tennessee State University

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Courtney Alley   Date

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Dr. Dustin Osborne, Thesis Advisor   Date

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Dr. Colin Glennon   Date

Abstract

Recent events have given attention to the public perception of criminal justice field in the United States. Although there has been much political debate about problems in the criminal justice field, attention should be turned to the prospective employees who will soon be seeking out these debates: college students seeking to enter the criminal justice field. The current study did that through survey data obtained from 112 students enrolled in criminal justice courses at East Tennessee State University during the Fall 2020 semester. Analysis revealed much about student interest in various criminal justice occupations, their perceived ability to perform the duties associated with them and the factors that motivated their decision-making. It also indicated that certain characteristics may influence desire to enter the policing and legal fields. Each of these findings is discussed.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the field of criminal justice there is wide diversity of occupations for individuals who are seeking to enter it. However, recent years have seen the field become more controversial as a result of ethical shortcomings of some practitioners and changes in society. In spite of this, criminal justice still attracts interest from many college students who choose to pursue degrees in criminology and related disciplines. Accordingly, what specific careers students are interested in and what drives them to choose these degrees is of interest to researchers. The perceptions a student has of a career is vital in understanding their choice. This study seeks to better understand those perceptions by administering a survey to a sample of students at East Tennessee State University. This survey will assess their views regarding several options within the criminal justice field, including policing, courts (e.g., attorneys; judges) and corrections (e.g., probation/parole officers; correctional officers). Findings here in should help to shed light on student motivations and influences.

Criminal Justice Careers

Policing

Though there are a variety of career options within the criminal justice field, the most popular (in terms of interest and opportunities) is policing. There are currently over 550,000 officers employed in the United States, spread across some 13,000 agencies (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). These agencies operate at the local, state and federal levels and are tasked with both responding to crime and preventing it. Research suggests that individuals are drawn to policing for a variety of reasons, including monetary incentives. Other incentives, like base pay, insurance benefits, disability benefits, and overtime availability have all proven to be attractive factors (Bulen, 2009). In addition, the desire to help others, strong job security, companionship

with co-workers, ability to enforce laws, and fighting crime also appear to be strong motivations (Lester, 1983).

Even though a bachelor's degree is not required by many agencies, college students have been increasingly targeted for recruitment in recent years, attending college job fairs and reaching out to professors and student groups at institutions within their region. A significant number of agencies have even changed their policies to mandate a four-year degree prior to being sworn in as an officer (Bumgarner, 2002). Furthermore, obtaining employment with state- or federal-level agencies almost always requires completion of a degree, even if hiring announcements do not specify it as being mandatory.

The push to increase education among officers is related to the increasing complexity of the field. For example, officers are no longer required to just react to crime, but instead are asked to develop proactive problem-oriented solutions. These require an advanced understanding of criminal decision-making, the ability to use data to inform approaches, and the reliance upon evidence-based practices (Dempsey, Forst, and Carter, 2017). As such, skills learned in the classroom (like research methodology and statistical analysis) are now needed more than ever. It is likely that this push toward increased education will continue in the future.

Although policing can be an attractive occupation, there are several factors that might dissuade individuals from choosing it. For example, part of the job is the requirement to use force when necessary. Determining the appropriate level of force to use in a situation can be difficult, even with advanced training (Dempsey, Forst, and Carter, 2017). Many individuals may be unable to deal with the stress that this causes. In addition, officers are seemingly always at risk of personal harm since most of the situations and individuals that they encounter are at least somewhat volatile. This adds an additional layer of stress. Research has also found that many

officers struggle with maintaining friendships, meeting community expectations, fulfilling responsibilities in their home life and maintaining a healthy lifestyle due to the demands of the job (Dempsey, Forst, and Carter, 2017).

Recent years have seen even more pressure added to the lives of officers. The unethical behaviors of some officers have led to negative portrayals in the media and turning public sentiment (Sullivan, 2018). In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s infamous "I Have a Dream" speech, he argued "We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality." Rodney King will always be remembered as a result of his 1991 beating by several white Los Angeles police officers following a car chase (Maurantonio, 2014). The beating was videotaped by a white bystander and constantly played and replayed by news media, making the footage "one of the most watched pieces of amateur video in history" (Maurantonio, 2014). The following year, Los Angeles riots erupted when the four accused officers were acquitted, making Rodney King an icon of modern anti-police brutality and antiracial profiling movements.

In 2012, the media erupted with a fresh story from California of a fatal death involving police brutality. A violent encounter between George Zimmerman and seventeen-year-old African American Trayvon Martin made national news after Zimmerman fatally shot Martin. Zimmerman was later arrested and charged with second-degree murder, but was shortly acquitted after claiming self-defense. The nation faced another prolonged series of riots in 2016, when unarmed 18-year-old African American Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department in Missouri. Wilson and a second police officer detained Brown and a friend as they were walking down the road. A brief struggle occurred before Brown tried to flee with the officer following. Seconds later, Brown stopped in

his tracks and turned to face officer. Some eyewitness accounts claim Brown held up his hands in surrender, whereas others claim he charged towards the officer. Brown was shot multiple times by Wilson, killing him on the spot. The city of Ferguson then faced riots for two straight weeks. There has been a sharp increase in theories of why police violence is occurring, such as a potential *"Ferguson effect"*. This refers to an increase in violent crime in a community due to a lack of proactive policing because of hostility resulting from widely publicized incidents of police brutality (Braswell, McCarthy, and McCarthy, 2017).

In response to supposed police brutality, the African American population began a political movement in 2013 known as Black Lives Matter that began the first sharp divide between the public and the police force. In recent events, police brutality sparked an international response and the United States found again itself embroiled in protests. Americans reacted strongly when the death of George Floyd was caught on video. The recording that circulated in the media showed a Minneapolis policemen holding Floyd to the ground in a chokehold with his knee while Floyd uttered his last words "I can't breathe." Three other police officers were standing nearby while the officer held his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds until Floyd suffocated and died. Floyd had been suspected of passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. He, among others who lost their job resulting from the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, had recently been laid off as a security guard. As the video spread, Americans across the nation finally felt the shame and guilt claimed against them towards the African American community for so many years, and many joined them in Black Lives Matter protests once the anger that followed sparked the urge for change. Society acted together in countless protests and demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, not just in

Minneapolis, but in cities across the United States and in over 60 countries, including every continent but Antarctica (Oriola and Knight, 2020).

Corrections

The correctional system within the United States includes agencies operating at the federal and state levels. These agencies are organizations like state departments of corrections that oversee community supervision and rehabilitation of offenders. In addition, it encompasses private correctional corporations that contract with governments (DeLisi and Conis, 2013). Federal and state criminal justice systems use the term corrections in place of the term penology when referring to the network of agencies that supervise individuals in a state of incarceration, rehabilitation, parole or probation. Many think corrections are only responsible for inmates in prison; however, the system oversees offenders who are conditionally released, as well as those who are merely issued penalties that do not require imprisonment but who still require legally prescribed supervision. A correctional officer's role is to supervise the confinement of inmates who are serving their sentences, but other responsibilities typically include the reform and rehabilitation of sentenced offenders, organizing educational opportunities, and offering counseling in preparation for reentry into society ("U.S. Correctional System," 2020).

The field of corrections has become more intricate over the years (Clear, Reisig, and Cole, 2016). New laws, new procedures, and new technologies have required the law enforcement community to improve the education and training of their personnel. The ability to recruit and train quality correctional officers has been a high priority within criminal justice agencies. However, maintaining separate training facilities is very expensive, and agencies find that they are often duplicating efforts of other agencies and local colleges. Many agencies have looked to the community college to be a cost-effective and efficient way to acquire the necessary

training and educational programs for their employees (Clear, Reisig, and Cole, 2016). The vocational resources alongside the academic resources enables the community college to train correctional personnel. Many programs are offered through these institutions, and students who intend to gain a four-year degree are encouraged to obtain an Associates of Arts or Sciences. Some colleges often offer a certificate program in lieu of an Associate's degree.

There are other careers beyond the standard correctional officer, including probation officers who work outside a correctional facility, substance abuse counselors to help offenders overcome addiction to drugs or alcohol, nurses, case managers who are responsible for helping with an offender's rehabilitation, and wardens or other administrators (DeLisi and Conis, 2013). Correctional officers believe in rehabilitating others so that they reenter society as law-abiding citizens. In the corrections field, a main goal is reform and reducing the threat an individual might pose (DeLisi and Conis, 2013). As a corrections worker, one can maintain stable employment because there will always be prisons. Mandatory minimum sentences have grown in popularity recently, leading to stability within the field (DeLisi and Conis, 2013).

The United States' incarceration rate is currently the highest of any country at 743 people per 100,000 (Clear, Reisig, and Cole, 2016). Even though the crime rate has decreased since 1980, the incarceration rate has increased. Studies have found there is little relationship between crime rate and incarceration rate (Clear, Reisig, and Cole, 2016). Today the prison system in the United States is one of the highest expenses of American taxpayers. It is evident that incarceration rates disproportionately effect minorities. African Americans are incarcerated at a five times greater rate than whites, and they, along with Hispanics, make up most of the American prison population (Clear, Reisig, and Cole, 2016). By 2002, approximately 12 percent of black men in their twenties were in prison or jail, leading researchers to believe prison time

was becoming "normal" for young black males (Petit and Western, 2004). The War on Drugs is a major credited source as well with half of the prison population serving time for drug violations (Clear, Reisig, and Cole, 2016). Since the 1980s, law enforcement agencies have shifted their focus to combat illegal drug use and sales resulting in a significant increase in the nation's arrest and incarceration rates (Lurigio, 2004). Although drug use has declined, in 2000 alone, more than 1.5 million persons were arrested for drug offenses (Lurigio, 2004). While there have been many proposed solutions for the overcrowding caused as a result, the prison population will become too substantial to maintain if trends continue, creating potential issues for those employed within the field.

Courts

Courts are the third component of the criminal justice system. The framers of the American Constitution created a federal system of government, with individual states and local entities (e.g., cities, counties) also featuring the ability to establish laws and regulations. This leads to a complex system, with courts operating at the federal and state levels. The federal system is comprised of the U.S. Supreme Court, 13 appellate courts known as the U.S. Court of Appeals, and 94 district courts (Carp, Manning, Holmes, and Stidham, 2020). The Supreme Court has a unique function in that its goal is to provide a balance between the state and Nation, while also interpreting federal legislation. Although this Court has original and appellate jurisdiction, it is overwhelmingly an appellate court and possesses the final word on interpretation of the law (Carp, Manning, Holmes, and Stidham, 2020). The twelve regional circuit courts, or the U.S. Courts of Appeal, are responsible for reviewing cases appealed from federal district courts, with the thirteenth court constituting a federal, jurisdictional circuit instead of a geographical circuit. The district courts operate as the trial courts for the federal system.

This is where the factual record is established at the federal level (Carp, Manning, Holmes, and Stidham, 2020).

No two states are alike with their organization of state courts. Each state is free to organize its judicial system as it pleases. However, most states divide their courts into four general levels: courts of limited jurisdiction, trial courts of general jurisdiction, intermediate appellate courts, and courts of last resort (Carp, Manning, Holmes, and Stidham, 2020). Trial courts of limited jurisdiction possess a variety of names, and these courts handle most litigation in the country. Specific categories like juvenile criminal cases and probate cases fall under the jurisdiction of the general trial courts. These courts also have an appellate function where they hear certain cases originating in trial courts of limited jurisdiction (Carp, Manning, Holmes, and Stidham, 2020). The purpose of intermediate appellate courts is to relieve workload of high courts. These courts are commonly known as court of appeals, with most states having one with state-wide jurisdiction. The courts of last resort are the high courts of the state, or supreme courts, that are the last line of appeals at the state level.

Several occupations are available to those seeking to work in the court system. Once an arrest is achieved, the system hands the responsibility to the court room. The prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges co-exist in the *courtroom work group* and work in a highly visible setting of the courthouse (Walker, 2015). Prosecutors push for convictions of those accused, defense attorneys seek acquittal for their clients, and judges serve as a neutral arbiter during court proceedings (Walker, 2015). The jobs require much responsibility as well as perseverance, so it is not surprising that some college students are hesitant to pursue them. The U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics reported in 2019 that there were approximately 813,900 people employed as attorneys and 45,300 employed as a judge or hearing officer (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,

2020). Additionally, there are other occupations in the legal field, such as a paralegal who is not an attorney but works closely with them, or a court clerk that is responsible for the administrative side of the court room (Walker, 2015).

Most of the courtroom workgroup attends law school to obtain a legal education. However, some perceive that a legal education is a bad economic investment. Some attribute this argument to the fact that few students pay for their education without borrowing funds and the debt from these loans is high in relation to the typical salaries, so much so that it will be difficult for most students to pay back the loans (Matasar, 2010). Tuition for state schools is also regularly increasing, making it difficult for prospective students to lower their costs. Studies of the legal profession have confirmed that there are hierarchies in the profession that most are aware of (Dinovitzer and Garth, 2007). Access to the most prestigious positions has also not been attained by women and minorities in proportion to their representation in the legal population (Dinovitzer and Garth, 2007). Richard A. Matasar, the President and Dean of New York Law School, claims most students in the past, present, and future have not wanted or will not want to go to work for "Big Law" (2010). If they go into private practice, most law graduates will work for smaller firms or end up in solo practice, with many working for the government. As many would agree the legal field carries a label of professionalism, these new trends in employment may eventually change such a label.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the structure of the American criminal justice system and the various occupations that comprise it. In addition, it focused on the factors related to each occupation that may serve to make it an attractive option or dissuade individuals from pursuing it. The next chapter will discuss past research on student perceptions of these careers and

introduce the research questions associated with this study. The third chapter will cover the methodology employed in the study, while the fourth will discuss its results. Finally, the fifth chapter will provide a discussion of how these results can inform our understanding of student decision-making when approaching career selection.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are various options for individuals who want to enter the criminal justice field. Each of these options has aspects of the job that make it attractive. However, there are also potential drawbacks that might dissuade someone from pursuing it. Because many jobs now have educational requirements, it is important to better understand the perceptions of college students seeking to enter the field. This chapter will highlight previous research on the topic before introducing the questions and hypotheses associated with the current study.

To gain and understanding of student perceptions of the criminal justice field, it is first important to understand perceptions of criminal justice education. Schanz (2013) conducted a survey at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania involving participants enrolled in both criminal justice and law enforcement courses. The law enforcement courses were highly specialized and focused upon police training, whereas the criminal justice courses were more general an in line with typical college education. The university population was different from a "traditional" university in that most participants were older, employed, and had a family. Using a Likert scale where participants responded to a given statement with options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, Schanz (2013) found student's overall perceptions of their education in criminal justice was favorable. The average score for responses on the survey was 8.29 (on a 10-point scale), suggesting students felt that their education was crucial to their career aspirations. The study also found that variables such as gender, race, and age did not influence perceptions. However, it did find that those majoring in law enforcement were more likely than criminal justice majors to believe that higher education was essential for their career goals and

future jobs. Since many already worked in the field, they perceived that an education would help them earn a higher salary and get promotions (Schanz, 2013).

Some research has questioned whether the specific type of institution influences how students will perceive the criminal justice field. Dretsch, Moore, Campbell and Dretsch (2014) surveyed three types of institutions to examine whether institution type, as well as race, gender, major, and perception of fair treatment helped to determine criminal justice student's desire to pursue a career in law enforcement. The sample consisted of 305 criminal justice students, with roughly equal numbers drawn from a predominantly white institution, a historically black institution, and a mixed-race institution. Results from the survey revealed no statistical significance between the desire to pursue a career in law enforcement and the type of institution. However, it did find race as having a statistically significant effect on desire, suggesting non-whites were more likely to desire a career in law enforcement. Criminal justice majors were also found to be more likely to seek a career in law enforcement than non-criminal justice majors (Dretsch et al., 2014).

In their study examining how personal characteristics such as race and gender influenced career choices, Stringer and Murphy (2020) distributed an anonymous survey in five criminal justice courses in the fall 2018 semester. Approximately 69% of the 91 students surveyed were criminal justice majors. The survey aimed to measure job attractiveness of various criminal justice professions, perceptions of punitiveness, and reasons for enrolling in criminal justice courses. The study's participants were mostly White and male, but other races were also represented. When asked to rate specific professions on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, with 10 as the most attractive, students, specifically males, cited law enforcement as most attractive. Professions such as correctional officers and court clerks were viewed as the least attractive.

Race was not found to be a statistically-significant predictor of career perception. Stringer and Murphy (2020) found that while many reasons existed for choosing criminal justice as a major, the most commonly mentioned were availability of jobs, job security, family and friends working in the system, and media exposure. Females were found to cite media exposure more frequently, while males cited job security as most important. Race was not statistically significant in terms of the results for this question (Stringer and Murphy, 2020).

Courtright and Mackey (2004) focused on a similar question (the relationship between student characteristics and career attractiveness) in their study of students at five universities. Approximately 60% of their sample were criminal justice majors, with the majority being males. The study specifically analyzed interest in "traditional" occupations such as law enforcement and corrections. It found that criminal justice majors were more attracted to law enforcement careers than "other" majors, with both groups rating correctional professions less attractive than law enforcement ones. However, criminal justice majors did rate the attractiveness of corrections somewhat higher than other majors. It was suggested that this may be due to education in criminal justice dismissing common myths of correctional work. With analysis limited to criminal justice majors only, the study found females were less likely to find law enforcement occupations attractive as opposed to males, but correctional work more desirable. Law enforcement occupations was found as being more attractive by freshmen criminal justice majors than upperclassmen. Race failed to show as statistically significant correlation with career attractiveness (Courtright and Mackey, 2004).

Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) surveyed 400 students from twelve colleges across seven states in an attempt to provide a broad (and generalizable) analysis of perceptions of criminal justice students on their career choices. Participants were selected from students taking courses

in research methods and introduction to law enforcement. All students majoring in criminal justice were required to take these courses at the surveyed institutions. Surveys were mailed to responding faculty members of the courses, distributed in class, and then returned. Students were asked about their primary career goals, with 45% indicating the desire to enter local, state, or federal law enforcement. Fourteen percent (14%) of the sample indicated that they hoped to become lawyers; 10% suggesting careers in corrections, academics, or juvenile justice; and 31% were undecided about their future plans. When asked about their career choice, students strongly agreed that they were seeking an exciting position, that they wanted a position where they could be promoted, that they wished for a position where they could help people solve problems, and that they desired a secure position (Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999).

The research for recruitment on police officers has largely focused on studies within universities. Johnson and Dolan (2019) claim that often times, agencies look to university criminal justice programs as a pipeline for future officers because of the assumption that these students are highly likely to be interested in police work and that they have some knowledge obtained through their studies to help them successfully complete the job. In their study, Johnson and Dolan (2019) surveyed 772 undergraduate students enrolled at five large public universities in five states. The researchers found that many of these students, despite being criminal justice students, lacked a real or accurate understanding of the law enforcement profession. For example, 37% indicated that they did not know what goes on in a police academy, 44% indicated they did not know what a police sergeant does, and 50% indicated they did not know anything about how people were promoted within police departments (Johnson and Dolan, 2019).

Although research has been focused on why students choose policing, few studies have focused on why some are not interested in the field. To answer this question, Sullivan (2018)

conducted a study that involved distribution of an online survey to students at a four-year public university. In addition, it included follow-up interviews with willing students. Participants were recruited within the university through faculty members by asking them to encourage their student's to be involved. Specific faculty members in social science departments, such as sociology and justice studies, were specifically targeted because these fields most closely relate to policing. Students were also recruited through advertising techniques like flyers on campus or on social media. The research found that males were over two times more likely to be interested in policing than females. Those majoring or minoring in criminal justice were nearly 15 times more likely to be interested in policing than other majors (Sullivan, 2018).

Participants cited the public's negative attitudes toward the police as a strong deterrent to entering the field (Sullivan, 2018). Effects such as views of the police and personal interactions with the police were used to examine student's interest in policing. Many participants stated that the media coverage of police shows systemic issues in the policing field related to racial inequality and unfair treatment. Many also stated that they believed the coverage did not portray an accurate representation of the full encounter, so they could not accurately judge an officer's demeanor. Some claimed the coverage was biased or only highlighted the "bad apples" of police work, leading the public to see faults in all police officers. However, some participants shared the belief that seeing incidents involving police brutality and misconduct in the media were signs of a greater problem in the policing field (Sullivan, 2018).

Sullivan (2018) found that specific job characteristics were viewed as being unattractive, such as the dangers of the job or concern about being "tough enough" to do it. Put differently, many students reported preferring a job with less risk associated with it. Many were also concerned that their size and physical build was not fitting for the role as an officer. Still, the

most common concern among participants was the perceived stigma and reputation that they feel

police officers carry today. The disrespect and public criticism that police officers endure daily

were the most influential deterrents for them wanting to enter the field (Sullivan, 2018).

One study questioned whether career aspirations differed by class standing (freshman,

sophomore, junior, or senior), specifically focusing on criminal justice majors. Walters and

Kremser (2016) recruited 200 criminal justice majors at Kutztown University to address this

question. They found that class standing featured a correlation with career aspirations, with

underclassmen (freshmen and sophomores) being significantly more likely to report that they

were pursuing a career in law enforcement than upperclassman (juniors and seniors). Because

underclassman also reported watching crime-related shows and movies more frequently, the

researchers theorized that their higher levels of interest may have related to false views of the

field. They also claimed that upperclassmen may base their aspirations on what they had learned

through studying criminal justice or what they had experienced through internships and volunteer

work (Walters and Kremser, 2016).

Various educational paths can be used to pursue policing occupations, prompting some

work exploring the impact of these paths. Bumgarner (2002) questioned whether students

enrolled in traditional four-year programs featured differing perceptions of policing as a

profession than those in two-year programs (e.g., community or technical colleges). He also

sought to identify which characteristics led students to feature a professional view policing as

opposed to a craft or trade orientation. This question was based on the logic that students

pursuing a four-year liberal arts degree may be more likely to be more professional-minded in

their position and therefore would make better candidates for police officers within departments.

Bumgarner administered a survey to criminal justice and law enforcement students enrolled in

five post-secondary institutions offering peace officer education. Two of the participating institutions offered two-year criminal justice or law enforcement programs; two were residential four-year institutions that offered baccalaureate programs in criminal justice or law enforcement, and the fifth institution was a four-year, urban commuter university (Bumgarner, 2002).

To measure perceptions of policing, Bumgarner (2002) used two separate scales, one each for professionalism and craftmanship. These scales contained five-point Likert-style items (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree), with lower means indicating a higher professional orientation. Results showed that two-year students (contrary to predictions) reported a higher orientation than the four-year students. Bumgarner (2002) claimed one possible reason behind this relates to the fact that the two-year law enforcement programs tend to be closer to the occupation of policing than four-year programs. His results suggested that there is very little difference between the professional outlook of police work held by four-year liberal arts students and two-year community and technical college students. Indeed, the study suggests a slightly greater professional outlook from the two-year students (Bumgarner, 2002).

Recently, Collica-Cox and Furst (2020) built upon previous work by exploring various fields within the criminal justice system, student perceptions of them, and how recent developments influenced those perceptions. Students were surveyed regarding whether they would consider working in specific types of positions in the criminal justice field. Corrections appeared to be the least favored career option, while federal law enforcement was the most preferred. Less than one-third of the sample (30%) stated that they would consider seeking a career in corrections. African Americans were the most likely to be open in considering careers in all areas of criminal justice, including corrections. Collica-Cox and Furst (2020) partially attribute the disinterest in corrections to crime-related dramas that depict policing much more

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positively than corrections. Where law enforcement is presented as thrilling and respectable, most portrayals of corrections are negative, considering how often corrections officers are referred to as "guards." Popular shows such as "Orange Is the New Black" often misrepresent correctional workers and prisoner populations, leading Collica-Cox and Furst (2020) to claim these shows contribute to why students are less likely to think about corrections and/or working with offenders as a potential profession.

Another recent study, in conjunction with the American Association of Law Schools, explored declining student interest in the legal field. Thomas and Cochran (2020) surveyed undergraduates from 25 four-year institutions, and first-year law students from 44 law schools. The findings are based on 15 years of survey results from the College Senior Survey (CSS), a nationwide exit survey that annually collects data on topics related to college outcomes and post-college goals, administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The study also utilizes data from HERI's The Freshman Survey (TFS) to examine changes in law interest from freshman to senior year by comparing responses to the CSS and TFS among seniors who completed both questionnaires (Thomas and Cochran, 2020).

Results indicated that the proportion of graduating seniors reporting an interest in law has decreased over time. By contrast, the percentage of graduating seniors reporting the bachelor's as their highest planned degree has increased. These findings led researchers to believe this suggests that the decline in law school interest could be symptomatic of an overall decline in graduate and professional school interest among recent college graduates (Thomas and Cochran, 2020). When asked to rate themselves relative to their peers, seniors aspiring to law school tended to have higher self-perceptions of their abilities and skills compared to seniors with other

degree aspirations. They rated their public speaking, writing, and leadership abilities above average more often than seniors with other graduate school plans (Thomas and Cochran, 2020).

Still, the study found more than half of seniors—both those aspiring to law careers and those with other interests—cited financial security as an essential career goal. This finding supports the belief that the cost and potential debt of attending law school is the top potential deterrent of attendance among undergraduates most likely to pursue a law degree. Seniors who reported law as their probable career more frequently reported working for social change as a very important or essential career consideration compared to those with other career plans (Thomas and Cochran, 2020). Seniors who developed an interest in law during college more frequently reported an increase in the importance of influencing the political structure. However, the study found some seniors planned to pursue a law degree, but not a legal career. The number and proportion of seniors aspiring to attain a law degree in the study consistently exceeded those of seniors aspiring to a career as an attorney or judge, indicating that some graduating seniors view the J.D. as an asset for other occupations (Thomas and Cochran, 2020).

In summation, research indicates that students have varied interests in terms of career aspirations. Students tend to perceive policing professions more highly than those in corrections and the legal field. Although students may still respect the legal field, research has credited negative media causing distrust as a deterrent for corrections. In addition, it has found that some demographic characteristics may play a role in student decision-making, though perceptions of potential benefits and drawbacks appear to outweigh the influence of these characteristics. As race did play a role in the previous studies, gender emerged differently in each. With mixed findings, the combined literature calls for the need of further study of the influence of these characteristics and outside influences such as the media that may play a role in forming

perceptions. Attention is now turned to how the current study seeks to build upon this research literature.

The Current Study

This study aims to broaden the literature regarding student perceptions of careers in the criminal justice system, specifically targeting policing, corrections, and the legal field. The study assesses the perceptions of student's enrolled in criminal justice courses at East Tennessee State University, a public university located in Johnson City, Tennessee. Several research questions related to the topic are explored (see Table 1 for a full summary).

Table 1: *Research Questions*

R1: Which careers are students taking criminal justice classes most interested in?

R2: How confident are students in their ability to perform the duties associated with various careers?

R3: How do students taking criminal justice classes perceive various career fields in criminal justice?

R4: What factors motivate students taking criminal justice classes when choosing a criminal justice profession?

R5: What impact do common influences (e.g., family, media) play in student perceptions of careers?

R6: What impact do student characteristics play in perceptions of policing, courts, and corrections careers?

Chapter Three: Methodology

The current study is designed to explore the perceptions of students enrolled in criminal justice courses at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) as it relates to possible career choices. This chapter will begin by discussing the characteristics of both the University and the major in criminal justice and criminology. Next, it will discuss the sampling approach and survey instrument utilized to gather data. In addition, it will cover the various measures that will be employed and the manner in which data will be analyzed.

ETSU has a population of approximately 16,000 students. The major in Criminal Justice & Criminology (CJCR) is among the largest at the University, with a student population of approximately 350 undergraduate and graduate students. The recruitment of participants occurred through an email to professors in the CJCR Department at East Tennessee State asking them to forward a recruitment email to students enrolled in their courses. Of the 10 Professors who were contacted, eight replied and agreed to direct students to the survey. The responding professors then emailed students or posted the link to the survey on their course management websites. Data were obtained from a total of 112 students enrolled in a criminal justice course at ETSU during the Fall 2020 academic term. All students were required to be above the age 18 to complete the survey. Students were not offered an incentive upon completion of the survey, and were informed participation was completely voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all criminal justice courses for the Fall 2020 semester were instructed online. Potential participants were given a description of the purpose of the survey and provided with a link to the Survey Monkey hosting site. Before beginning the survey, each student was asked to read an informed consent document and agree to the stated terms.

Survey Instrument

Respondents were asked to respond to a survey containing questions designed to explore their perceptions of career fields in the criminal justice system (See Appendix A for the complete survey document). The first section explored demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race and political affiliation. In addition, it assessed whether participants had close family members employed in either policing, courts or corrections. The remaining questions were focused on measuring student's perceptions of various criminal justice careers and motivational factors in their decision-making process. The first set of questions related to perceptions asked students to report their level of interest in pursuing various careers (on a Likert scale with options ranging from not interested at all to very interested). The careers included local law enforcement, state law enforcement, federal law enforcement, probation/parole officer, correctional officer in the jail setting, correctional officer in the prison setting, correctional counselor, criminal attorney, civil attorney, and a justice/judge.

Students were then asked to rate their confidence level—in terms of their ability to perform the duties associated with professions—from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (very confident) for the same professions. Next, students were asked to rate various motivational factors, from not important at all to very important, in influencing their choice of profession. These factors included the following: job prestige/status, job security, ease of finding a job, salary, health benefits/retirement, opportunity for advancement, diversity of daily tasks, ability to help others, political support of occupation, flexibility of work schedules, no additional education requirements beyond a Bachelor's degree, similarities with co-workers, and work environment. The second-to-last series of questions addressed overall perceptions of the previously mentioned professions from highly negative to highly positive. The final set explored

whether factors such as family member employment (in the criminal justice field), media coverage, and public perception of criminal justice careers played a role in their decision-making. Options for these items ranged from not at all influential (1) to highly influential (5).

Measures

Independent variables. The study included various independent variables to better explore a portion of the research questions. The first independent variable, *age*, was measured at the ratio-level, with students providing their current age (at the time of survey completion). Options for *gender* included male, female, other, and prefer not to respond. For purposes of the analysis, this was recoded as female (0) and male (1). Several options were provided for both *race* and *ethnicity*. However, in line with previous research and to create a dichotomous variable for the (to be discussed) regression models, this was recoded to (0) white, non-Hispanic and (1) other. *Academic standing* was measured as students selecting one of five categories: Freshman (1), sophomore (2), junior (3), senior (4), and graduate student (5). *Political affiliation* was measured as Republican (1), Democratic (2), or Independent (3), though this was dichotomized within the analysis to create options for other (0) and Republican (1). Lastly, *college major* indicated whether students were enrolled in the criminal justice program (1) or not (0). *College major* as any major, this variable was also dichotomized for the purpose of analysis as a criminal justice (1) major or other (2).

Dependent variables. Several dependent variables were explored in the current study. As previously discussed, the analysis assessed items related to career perception, desire to enter fields, motivating factors and perceived ability to fulfill duties. Each was measured via Likert-scale style items in order to allow for the creation of mean scores. In addition, and to answer the final research question, three dependent measures were computed relating to career desire:

policing, corrections, and the legal field. This involved creating scales associated for each. The

policing scale required adding the Likert-scale scores for each of the following: Interest in

federal policing, interest in state policing and interest in local policing. The resulting scores were

then divided by three (the number of items) to create a standardized measure. Similar steps were

taken for corrections (officers in jails, officers in prisons, probation/parole, and correctional

counselors) and the legal field (criminal law attorney, civil law attorney, and justice/judge).

Reliability statistics (discussed within the results section) were analyzed to ensure that each item

suitably fit within the respective scale.

Method of Analysis

Analysis of the data took place in a series of stages. The data from each survey was

entered into the statistical software SPSS to compute the results. First, the Survey Monkey

hosting site presented descriptive statistics for the sample characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race)

based on what participants reported. Second, mean scores were computed from the responses on

the Likert-scale from one (the lowest for each) to five (the highest for each) for the various items

related to career interest, confidence level, career perceptions, motivational factors, and potential

influences. This was achieved by aggregating the responses for each measure and dividing by N

(the sample size). This allowed for the ability to answer the initial research questions. Finally,

stage three involved the presentation of three regression models in SPSS designed to explore the

final research question related to interest in policing, corrections and the legal field. The various

independent measures were included within these models in order to assess their potential

impacts. The regression models were computed and the independent measures that showed as

statistically significant for each model were then analyzed in relation to that model.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the methodology associated with the current study, including a discussion of the survey instrument, sampling strategy, independent and dependent measures and proposed method of analysis. The next chapter will provide an overview of the results, with a specific focus on what they have to offer in relation to the research questions being explored.

Chapter Four: Results

The previous chapter outlined the methods employed in order to answer the study's

research questions. This chapter provides an overview of the findings that emerged when relying

on these methods. Results are broken down by research question.

Sample Characteristics

Table 2 contains a complete summary of the sample characteristics. One hundred and

twelve individuals completed the survey (N=112). The average age of these individuals was 23.5

years, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest being 62 (SD=7.62). In terms of gender, the

majority of the sample identified as female (72.3%), whereas 26.8% identified as male and one

individual (0.9%) selected the "other" response. In terms of race, 83.9% identified as white,

7.1% identified as Black, 0.9% (1) as Asian, 1.8% (2) as American Indian or Alaskan Native,

and 6.3% (7) identified in the "Other" category. The majority were juniors (25.9%) or seniors

(29.5%), with 18.8% being graduate students, 16.1% sophomores, and 8.9% freshmen. When

asked to describe political affiliation, 22.3% identified as Democrats, 38.4% as Republican, and

39.3% as Independent. The majority (85.7%) of respondents were majoring in criminal justice,

with the remainder selecting other majors.

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	30	26.8%
Female	81	72.3%
Other	1	0.9%
Race		
Black	8	7.1%
White	94	83.9%
Asian	1	0.9%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	1.8%
Other	7	6.3%
		(continued)

Hispanic Origin/Identity		
Yes	8	7.1%
No	104	92.9%
Academic Standing		
Freshman	10	8.9%
Sophomore	18	16.1%
Junior	29	25.9%
Senior	33	29.5%
Graduate Student	21	18.8%
Other	1	0.9%
Political Affiliation		
Democrat	25	22.3%
Republican	43	38.4%
Independent	44	39.3%
Major		
Criminal Justice	96	85.7%
Other	16	14.3%

Student Interest in Criminal Justice Careers

The first research question sought to explore student's level of interest in various criminal justice career options. Table 3 contains a complete summary of the scores for the Likert-scale items measuring this interest. As displayed, federal law enforcement featured the highest overall interest (M=3.60), followed by state law enforcement (M=2.88) and criminal law attorneys (M=2.75). On the other end of the spectrum, correctional officer in the jail setting (M=1.64) and prison setting (M=1.74), along with justice/judge (M=2.17) featured the lowest levels of interest.

Table 3: Level of Interest in Careers

Item	**Mean**
Federal Law Enforcement	3.60
State Law Enforcement	2.88
Attorney (Criminal Law)	2.75
Local Law Enforcement	2.57
Attorney (Civil Law)	2.43
Correctional Counselor	2.23
Probation or Parole Officer	2.20
Justice/Judge	2.17
Correctional Officer (Prison)	1.77
Correctional Officer (Jail)	1.64

Student Confidence in Abilities

The second research question explored student's confidence in their abilities to perform the duties associated with various career options. Table 4 contains a full summary of the findings for this research question. Students were most confident in their ability to perform the tasks of federal law enforcement (M=3.37), local law enforcement (M=3.32), and state law enforcement (M=3.26). Students were least confident in their ability to serve as a Justice/Judge (M=2.38), civil law attorney (M=2.64) and criminal law attorney (M=2.80). Correctional careers also featured lower overall means, indicating a general concern (in terms of ability).

Table 4: Confidence in Abilities

Item	Mean
Federal Law Enforcement	3.37
Local Law Enforcement	3.32
State Law Enforcement	3.26
Probation or Parole Officer	3.18
Correctional Officer (Jail)	2.85
Correctional Counselor	2.84
Correctional Officer (Prison)	2.83
Attorney (Criminal Law)	2.80
Attorney (Civil Law)	2.64
Justice/Judge	2.38

Student Perceptions of Careers

The next research question assessed student's overall perceptions of careers via Likert-scale items (ranging from highly negative to highly positive). A full summary of the data can be found in Table 5. Though all items featured means over 3.00, some were noticeably lower than others. Correctional careers in the jail setting (M=3.23) and prison setting (M=3.24), in addition to correctional counseling (M=3.28) were perceived most negatively. On the other end of the spectrum, the highest means emerged for justice/judge (M=4.09) and attorneys in civil (M=4.05) and criminal law (M=3.98).

Table 5: Perceptions of Careers

Item	Mean
Justice/Judge	4.09
Attorney (Civil Law)	4.05
Attorney (Criminal Law)	3.98
Federal Law Enforcement	3.92
Local Law Enforcement	3.73
State Law Enforcement	3.69
Probation or Parole Officer	3.51
Correctional Counselor	3.28
Correctional Officer (Prison)	3.24
Correctional Officer (Jail)	3.23

Student Motivations

The fourth research question explored student motivations when deciding on careers that interest them. As seen in Table 6, these motivations somewhat varied. Students rated the ability to help others (M=4.69) as the most influential factor in selecting a career choice. Some others worth noting are job security (M=4.34), the work environment (M=4.30), and opportunity for advancement (M=4.30). Interestingly, students rated political support (M=2.67) and lack of additional education requirements (M=2.75) as the least motivational factors in choosing a career in criminal justice. This suggests that political support and further education do not necessarily weigh as much in the decision-making process as other concerns. Surprisingly, job prestige/status emerged as a relatively neutral factor in terms of student motivation (M=3.00).

Table 6: Motivations

Item	Mean
Ability to Help Others	4.69
Job Security	4.34
Work Environment	4.30
Opportunity for Advancement	4.30
Health Benefits/Retirement	4.20
Salary	3.92
Diversity of Daily Tasks	3.76

Ease of Finding Available Job	3.76
Flexibility of Work Schedule	3.54
Similarities with Co-Workers	3.17
Job Prestige/Status	3.00
Lack of Additional Reqs	2.75
Political Support	2.67

Influences on Career Decisions

The fifth research question assessed the importance of three influences when deciding on

potential careers: (1) Family members, (2) media coverage, and (3) public perception. As seen in

Table 7, none of the influences were particularly impactful based upon the results. All three

influences featured mean values on the lower end of the influence scale, suggesting that students

based decisions on their own perceptions as opposed to those of others.

Table 7: Influences

Item	Mean
Family Members	1.98
Media Coverage	2.22
Public Perception	2.46

Impact of Personal Characteristics on Career Interest

The final research question sought to understand whether individual characteristics

influenced student's reported desire to enter various criminal justice fields following graduation.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, three broad fields were explored by creating scales

related to the following: (1) policing, (2) corrections and (3) legal. To ensure that such a tactic

was suitable, a reliability analysis was first performed for each. Results indicated that the

approach was justified, with policing (.803), corrections (.790), and legal (.853) all featuring

values over the .70 threshold.

Table 8 details the findings for the linear regression model related to policing interest. As

displayed, both age and political affiliation emerged as significant predictors. Age (β=-.05)

emerged as a negative predictor, indicating that older students were less likely to be interested in a policing profession. Political affiliation (β=.49) was positively associated with policing interest, suggesting that students who identified as Republicans were more likely to report a desire to enter the field. All other measures were non-significant in the model.

Table 8: Policing Interest Regression Model

Variable	B	SE	Significance
Age	-.05*	.02	.008
Gender	.28	.26	.278
Race	-.18	.31	.568
Academic Standing	-.03	.10	.766
Political Affiliation	.49*	.25	.050
Major	.14	.33	.676
Adjusted R^2	.09		

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01

The second regression model (Table 9) explored the relationship between individual characteristics and interest in the corrections profession. Unlike the model for policing, none of the included predictors emerged as statistically significant, suggesting that they shared no relationship with reported interest.

Table 9: Corrections Interest Regression Model

Variable	B	SE	Significance
Age	-.01	.01	.529
Gender	-.34	.21	.107
Race	-.48	.25	.062
Academic Standing	.09	.08	.283
Political Affiliation	-.02	.20	.927
Major	-.50	.27	.069
Adjusted R^2	.05		

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01

The final regression model assessed the relationship between characteristics and interest in the legal field (Table 10). Only major (β=.89) emerged as a statistically-significant predictor among the included variables. This suggests that students who were majoring in criminal justice were much more likely to be interested in the various professions associated with it than those who were majoring in other disciplines.

Table 10: Legal Interest Regression Model

Variable	B	SE	Significance
Age	-.02	.02	.376
Gender	-.29	.28	.295
Race	-.33	.33	.323
Academic Standing	-.14	.11	.196
Political Affiliation	-.29	.26	.277
Major	.89*	.35	.013
Adjusted R^2	.06		

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the sample characteristics and the analyses used to explore the various research questions. Results indicated that differences existed in relation to career interest, perceived abilities to fulfill duties associated with them, perceptions of various careers, and the impact of several potential influences (e.g., family, media). In addition, they suggested that certain individual characteristics may influence desires to enter the policing and legal fields. Attention is now turned to discussing these results and how they associate with the research literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Chapter Four discussed the results of the various tests used to answer the research questions in the current study. As discussed, these questions sought to better understand student's perceptions of various career fields, their desires to enter them, and the motivations related to career choice, among other things. This chapter will discuss these results in more detail, in addition to covering their implications. It will also highlight the limitations of the work and possible directions for future research.

The first research question explored which careers students taking criminal justice classes at East Tennessee State University were most interested in. Results indicated that the majority of respondents favored a career in law enforcement, with federal- and state-level options receiving the highest mean scores of 3.60 and 2.88 respectively. This finding is consistent with previous research and supports Courtwright and Mackey's (2004) contention that criminal justice majors, as the majority of respondents to the current survey were, are most likely to choose "traditional" careers such as law enforcement. In addition, it suggests that recent concerns related to policing (i.e., public scrutiny) may not impact student's interest in the field.

In terms of the least desirable careers, correctional officers in both the jail and prison settings featured the lowest mean values. Considering the previous literature (Collica-Cox and Furst, 2020; Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999), it is unsurprising correctional careers also featured low scores in terms of perceptions and confidence in abilities to perform job duties. With that said, low confidence levels could be attributed to an overall disinterest in correctional work. Where there is little interest, there may be little confidence. The highest motivational factor among surveyed students, the ability to help others (to be discussed), could also explain a potential reason for the lack of interest and confidence in one's ability to perform correctional work, as

correctional staff primarily focus on punishment and not rehabilitation (Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, and Baker, 2005).

The second research question sought to determine how confident students were in their abilities to perform the duties associated with various careers. Similar to the previous research question, results indicated that students were most confident in their ability to fulfill the duties of law enforcement professions (at the local-, state- and federal-levels). Previous research has not explored this question in great detail. However, it is possible that confidence is tied to career interest. Alternatively, it may be that students have greater exposure to policing careers through the news media and popular television shows/movies (Donovan and Klahm, 2015). This exposure and the familiarity that it creates could lead them to perceiving a better understanding of what the job entails. Finally, it is possible that the coursework associated with the major provides the most skills for policing over other criminal justice careers. This would in theory provide them with the perception that with a criminal justice degree they are prepared to perform the tasks involved in policing (Carlan, 2007).

In line with this logic, the careers featuring the lowest mean scores on the confidence measure were those associated with the legal field: civil law attorneys (M=2.64), criminal law attorneys (M=2.80) and judges/justices (M=2.38). It could be argued that student's low confidence in their ability to work in the legal field may explain the decrease in law school applications over the years. However, students in this study also perceived justices/judges and criminal and civil attorneys in a positive light. It is possible that responding students perceive a career in the legal field as prestigio us but difficult, and it could be the perceived challenges that deter them from pursuing it.

The third research question addressed student perceptions of various careers, with items measured from highly negative to highly positive. Findings indicated that correctional careers were viewed negatively overall, as correctional officers in the jail and prison setting, and correctional counselors featured the lowest mean scores. These results are in line with the work of Collica-Cox and Furst (2020), as well as Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, and Baker's (2005), as both studies found that corrections as a field were viewed more negatively than other options.

Alternatively, judges/justices and attorneys (both civil and criminal law) were viewed most positively by the sample (as previously discussed). It is possible that although many do not wish to pursue their own career in the legal field, they share the belief that legal actors occupy prestigious roles. The role of an attorney is typically associated with professionalism and hard work. However, these results differ from recent polling data in the United States that has shown the public image of lawyers is poor and associated with distrust (Asimow, et al, 2005). Research suggests that lawyers have seen a dramatic decline in their 'prestige' which has fallen faster than that of any other occupation over the last twenty years (Asimow, et al, 2005). This research may indicate an inconsistency in the public's view of attorneys in comparison with those of criminal justice students.

Research question four assessed the factors that motivate students when considering potential career options. Numerous possible factors were explored. Results suggest that the ability to help others, job security, work environment and the opportunity for advancement are most important. The ability to help others is a hallmark of policing. The fact that policing careers featured the higher level of interest among participants may be partially explained by this desire, which is in line with previous research (Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999). These findings are also

somewhat consistent with Krimmel and Tartaro's (1999) work indicating that students strongly agreed that they desired a secure position.

The factors viewed as least important were political support and the requirement for additional education. Previous research has suggested that the political environment may influence criminal justice career interest (Fine, Rowans, and Simmons, 2019). In addition, recent events (including calls for defunding police) have been perceived as potentially negatively impacting interest in criminal justice careers. It appears that these concerns were not overly important to participants. Though such concerns may influence students beginning their college careers, it is possible that current students are already invested in their studies and have determined that a criminal justice career is in their future (rendering current issues of little importance). To date, no work has explicitly explored the impact of additional educational requirements on the impact of criminal justice student career aspirations. However, the finding that this has little impact on decision-making is likely explained by the fact that most criminal justice careers do not require study beyond the bachelor's level. The only exception would be those associated with the legal field. However, students seeking to enter these professions are already cognizant of the requirement to attend law school.

The fifth research question sought to understand whether family members, media coverage and public perception influenced career decisions. Mean values were low across all three items, suggesting that other factors were more important in this process. Such a finding is important considering recent issues associated with the criminal justice field. Unethical behavior and systematic bias have been well-documented within the field, resulting in an increase in media attention and a decrease in public favorability (Sullivan, 2018). Though this may have an impact on career interest in the long-term, it appears that the current sample has not necessarily

been affected by these realities. This finding supports Walters and Kremser's (2016) claim that students may base their aspirations on what they had learned through studying criminal justice or what they had experienced through internships and volunteer work (as opposed to external influences). It also furthers Sullivan's (2018) assertion that some students dismiss media influence when considering careers in the field (specifically law enforcement).

The sixth research question addressed the impact of various individual characteristics on desires to enter policing, corrections and legal occupations. Several characteristics were explored in each of the three regression models. Gender was not found to explain interest in relation to any of the three careers. This is somewhat contrary to previous research, as both Stringer and Murphy (2020) and Courtwright and Mackey (2004) found that males were significantly more likely to be interested in policing. It is possible that the discrepancy relates to the limited research on the topic. However, it is also possible that the demographics of the current sample played a role. Over 72% of participants identified as female, potentially limiting the potential for variation in preferences to emerge. Regardless, the current work does not support the notion that gender plays a significant role in career interest.

Race and class standing were also not found to play a role in any of the models. Some may find this interesting due to the perception of policing as systematically racist. However, the results are in line with recent research findings suggesting that race is not always a significant predictor of criminal justice career aspirations (Stringer and Murphy, 2020; Schanz, 2013). However, it is worth noting the lack of racial diversity among respondents. Nearly 84% of participants selected white as their race. Similar to gender, this could explain the inability of the model to detect key differences between races. It is also interesting that class standing was not

significant, though the fact that age emerged as significant in the policing model may help to better understand this finding (to be discussed).

All remaining predictors emerged as statistically significant in at least one of the models. In relation to policing interest, both age and political affiliation were shown to play a role. Older individuals were found to have lower levels of interest in policing occupations. This is inconsistent with Schanz's (2013) findings, as age was found to not feature an influence in his study. This may call for future research on questions not addressed in this study, such as which factors can change perceptions of a career choice throughout the life course. However, it is possible that policing careers are more likely to feature age requirements (maximum age for entry into the profession), leaving non-traditional students exploring options in corrections, the legal field, or other entities within the field. In terms of political affiliation, Republicans were shown to be more interested in the law enforcement field. Fine, Rowans, and Simmons (2019) suggest that Republicans have typically been the "tough on crime" and "law and order" party and are overall more supportive of the police force and the criminal justice system. If so, Republicans view of the police as highly positive would make them more prone to desire a policing career over Democrats or Independents.

The linear regression model for interest in the legal field found that major was a significant predictor, indicating that criminal justice majors were more interested in pursuing careers in law. The lack of non-majors in the sample (around 14%) could partially explain this finding. However, it is also possible that those seeking a future law degree are drawn to the criminal justice major. This raises the question of what specific factors associated with a criminal justice degree influence student's pursuit of a legal career. Previous research has suggested that those pursuing a legal career do so for social change or to influence political structure (Thomas

and Cochran, 2020). One assumption could be that criminal justice courses such as ethics or public policy also focus on these goals, enticing students to enroll in it. It is also possible that law schools look favorably upon criminal justice students (or that students perceive this to be the case).

Interestingly, no predictors were shown as statistically significant for the interest in the corrections regression model. This may demonstrate a somewhat unanimous disinterest among all students towards the profession in corrections, which is supported by the results of several other research questions. Interest in these careers were quite low, as were students' perceptions of them. These findings could be of use to departments and agencies, as their may be a need for improvement in order to be attractive for those looking for employment.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this study were limited due to it being restricted to a single university, as well as recruitment of participants occurring solely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With only 112 responses, the sample could also be flawed in terms of representation. Diversity of participants is an additional concern, as 72.3 % were female and over 83% were White. This makes it difficult to generalize about both gender and race. Hence, non-criminal justice majors, males, and minorities are underrepresented in this study. It is possible that different findings would have emerged if this had not been the case.

The results of the study indicate the need for future research. For example, it is important to better understand why correctional work features low levels of interest, as suggested by previous studies (Collica-Cox and Furst, 2019; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, and Baker, 2005). Research is also limited on the lack of interest in pursuing a legal career in recent years. Because

of unspecified deterrents, researchers are left to find relationships between stated career goals and how they conform to a legal career. Additional research is necessary to focus on what students perceive to be obstacles to a legal career besides cost of attendance (Matasar, 2010). The current study also produces mixed findings relating to other research regarding the influence of media in public perceptions of criminal justice careers. Further study, primarily concerned with media influence on criminal justice careers, is essential to understanding the apparent discrepancy.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide additional research on student perceptions of criminal justice careers—specifically those related to policing, corrections, and the legal field. The findings may serve as support for the impact of certain characteristics in the decision-making process. Further, findings support general perceptions and student's confidence levels in their ability to perform specific careers in each of the three branches. The research is also informative of what motivates and influences students to seek a career in criminal justice. The results of the study show that students had both interest and confidence in relation to the law enforcement field (policing), while the legal field and corrections featured lower levels. Participant characteristics varied as predictors for each branch. Lastly, the study suggested that students base decisions on their own perceptions of criminal justice careers as opposed to those of others.

Several notable findings emerged from the analysis in the current study. First, it was supportive of the commonly referenced trends in the interest in law enforcement careers among criminal justice majors. Second, it showed that gender and race may not serve as significant factors in career interest, contradicting other studies that have found such a relationship. Third, it

also contradicted the assumption that career interest is influenced by media portrayals and coverage, a possibility highlighted by much recent work. Though this study featured several limitations—notably in relation to sample diversity—it is important to consider the findings, and how they may add to the existing literature. Studies such as the current one could be beneficial to departments to better attract college students for potential employment.

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Criminal Justice Student's Career Goals and Perceptions

1. What is your age? _____
2. Which of the following best describes your gender?
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Other
    d. Prefer not to say
3. Which of the following best describes your race?
    a. Black
    b. White
    c. Asian
    d. American Indian or Alaska Native
    e. Other
4. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin or descent?
    a. Yes
    b. No
5. Which of the following best describes your current academic standing at ETSU?
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. Graduate Student
    f. Other
6. What is your current major (select all that apply)?
    a. Criminal Justice & Criminology
    b. Psychology
    c. Sociology
    d. Social Work
    e. Political Science
    f. Other (please specify) _____
7. If you are not majoring in Criminal Justice & Criminology, is it your minor?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. N/A (I am majoring in Criminal Justice & Criminology)
8. Which of the following best describes your political affiliation?
    a. Republican
    b. Democrat
    c. Independent
9. Which of the following best describes the area that you grew up in?
    a. Rural
    b. Suburban
    c. Urban

10. Have you ever been employed in a criminal justice occupation?
    a. No
    b. Yes (please specify what your occupation is/was) _____
11. Do you have any family members employed in the following:

Policing (federal, state or local)

    a. No
    b. Yes

Corrections (e.g., correctional officers, counselors or administrators)

    c. No
    d. Yes

Legal system (e.g., attorneys, paralegals, judges)

    e. No
    f. Yes

Probation or parole officer

    g. No
    h. Yes

The following section asks about your level of interest in several career options in criminal justice. Please indicate how interested you are in pursuing each of the options (as a future career) from (1) Not interested at all to (5) Very Interested.

Career	Not Interested At All 1	2	Somewhat Interested 3	4	Very Interested 5
Local Law Enforcement					
State Law Enforcement					
Federal Law Enforcement					
Crime Scene Technician					
Crime Lab Technician					
Probation or Parole Officer					
Correctional Officer (Jail)					
Correctional Officer (Prison)					
Correctional Counselor					
Security Guard					
Attorney (Criminal Law)					
Attorney (Civil Law)					
Criminal Justice Researcher					
Criminal Justice Teacher/Professor					
Justice/Judge					

The next set of questions ask how confident you are that you would be capable of performing the duties required of these careers. Please indicate your level of confidence in your ability from (1) Not confident at all to (5) Very confident.

Career	Not Confident At All 1	2	Somewhat Confident 3	4	Very Confident 5
Local Law Enforcement					
State Law Enforcement					
Federal Law Enforcement					
Crime Scene Technician					
Crime Lab Technician					
Probation or Parole Officer					
Correctional Officer (Jail)					
Correctional Officer (Prison)					
Correctional Counselor					
Security Guard					
Attorney (Criminal Law)					
Attorney (Civil Law)					
Criminal Justice Researcher					
Criminal Justice Teacher/Professor					
Justice/Judge					

The following items relate to your motivations when deciding on a career path. Please indicate how important each of the following is in your decision, ranging from (1) Not important at all to (5) Very important.

Motivation	Not Important At All 1	2	Somewhat Important 3	4	Very Important 5
Job Prestige/Status					
Job Security					
Ease of Finding an Available Job					
Salary					
Health Benefits/Retirement					
Opportunity for Advancement					
Diversity of Daily Tasks					
Ability to Help Others					
Political Support of the Occupation					
Flexibility of Work Schedules					
No additional educational requirements beyond a Bachelor's					
Similarities with co-workers					
Work Environment					

The following items relate to your perceptions of common career fields in criminal justice. Please indicate how you perceive each on a scale from highly negative (1) to highly positive (5).

Career	Highly Negative 1	2	Neither Negative or Positive 3	4	Highly Positive 5
Local Law Enforcement					
State Law Enforcement					
Federal Law Enforcement					
Crime Scene Technician					
Crime Lab Technician					
Probation or Parole Officer					
Correctional Officer (Jail)					
Correctional Officer (Prison)					
Correctional Counselor					
Security Guard					
Attorney (Criminal Law)					
Attorney (Civil Law)					
Criminal Justice Researcher					
Criminal Justice Teacher/Professor					
Justice/Judge					

Please indicate how influential each of the following are to your interest in a criminal justice career on a scale of (1) Not at all Influential to (5) Highly Influential.

	Not at all Influential 1	2	Somewhat Influential 3	4	Highly Influential 5
Family Member Employed in Field					
Coverage of Career Field in the Media					
Public Perceptions of Field					