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College Students' Perception of Law Enforcement

By

Joseph Turner Lyon

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the

University Honors Scholars Program

Honors College

and the

Honors-in-Discipline Criminal Justice Program

College of Arts and Sciences

East Tennessee State University

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Date

Abstract

There are many ways that people can form an opinion about law enforcement even if they have had a personal interaction with someone who works in the field. This idea has always been interesting as there needs to be some type of understanding when it comes to this certain viewpoint. There can be many factors that result in having a certain perspective on law enforcement in general like their background growing up, hearsay from close relatives, friends, and whatever they have seen up close in person. This study is going to aim at a specific area of how people view law enforcement from being exposed to certain types of movies, television shows, and news outlets. This idea has been discussed but it does not really dominate too much of the political arena. This study is designed to examine the perceptions of college students, good or bad, in regard to what they were exposed to growing up watching on television that included law enforcement. Data were obtained via surveys that were given out to 104 students at East Tennessee State University. Analysis revealed that there was no significant relationship between the types of media that the college students watched that shaped their current perceptions of policing.

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Chapter One

Introduction

One recent topic of debate, as it relates to the realm of criminal justice, is the societal perception of law enforcement agencies and those employed by them. In recent years, law enforcement has been heavily criticized by segments of the public (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Various movements, such as *Black Lives Matter*, have called for police reform, and there have been many requests to defund or abolish law enforcement entirely (Rine, 2021). Much of this discussion has taken place in the media, as it serves to facilitate the spread of ideas and information. In some ways, public perceptions serve to shape media narratives, though research has shown that media portrayals also serve to influence individual perceptions (Surette, 2014). As such, it is important for criminal justice researchers to assess the ways in which media consumption serves to shape these perceptions of the police. This study sought to gain a better understanding of those perceptions by administering a survey to a sample of students at East Tennessee State University. The survey assessed their views of law enforcement, as well as their frequency of media consumption (across various forms). In addition, it controlled for other potential impactful variables, such as demographic characteristics and previous experience with the criminal justice system. The findings of the study shed light on how students view law enforcement as a whole and how these factors have shaped their opinions about law enforcement.

Media's Role in Criminal Justice

Background

Media consumption is a large part of most individual's daily lives (Verdugo & Fierro, 2014). Individuals consume news stories, entertainment (e.g., shows, movies), and other forms on a regular basis. For example, some spend years watching the same shows and movies, or regularly consuming content from the same set of news outlets. Though some are cognizant of the impact that this has on their perceptions of the world, others fail to realize how it has shaped their outlook on different topics (Verdugo & Fierro, 2014). For instance, those who frequently watch action movies where the hero is a police officer might come to view all officers as heroes who serve to protect society from evil. Others who consume media critical of law enforcement may over time arrive at the opposite opinion. Regardless, the beliefs that are instilled as a result of these media portrayals may become "set in stone," making it difficult to take a nuanced view of policing and the various issues central to it.

This issue is so important due to the fact that media portrayals of the criminal justice system in general, and specifically policing, are quite common (Gates, 2006). This is true of both fictional entertainment (e.g., television shows, movies) and traditional news items (e.g., newspaper stories, national and local news programming). For example, crime dramas are so popular that a recent analysis showed that nearly 20% of scripted television shows feature the criminal justice system in some way (Porter, 2020). Media portrayals of policing are also influential due to the fact that many people rarely (or never) have an encounter with an officer in real life; thus, their overall perceptions are guided (at least in part) by the media that they consume. Crawford (1999) discusses this phenomenon in detail, and how it can be used to assist

people in understanding any biases that they have. He used popular entertainment—in the form of movies and television shows—as a teaching tool for his students (Crawford, 1999). They were advised on the realistic and unrealistic aspects of those programs, discussing also how popular themes are contradicted in everyday policing. Crawford (1999) believed that such strategies help to overcome misguided notions and better prepare individuals for careers in the field. Though his work has largely revolved around students, it is easy to see how the general public may also foster biases and be helped through a more nuanced understanding of media influence.

Media consumption can be said to dominate modern society, as televisions, laptops, mobile phones, and social media apps are all ubiquitous (Podara et al., 2021). People consume a great deal of information on a daily basis—so much that it may seem impossible to not be somewhat influenced by it. This is certainly true when it relates to perceptions of law enforcement. For example, Edwards (2007) argues that it is logical that the media can impact people's perception of policing. Further, there is a juxtaposed relationship with the portrayal of law enforcement in that the media can show both positive and negative representations (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). On one hand, the media represents crime as indefensible, while on the other they tend to not give law enforcement positive feedback when confronting it (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Such representations can have significant influence on individual perceptions when firsthand experience and/or knowledge is lacking.

As previously mentioned, personal interactions with police officers are relatively rare across the U.S. population (Lai & Zhao, 2010). For those that do interact with officers, these events may serve to influence their perceptions of the field as a whole. Some perceptions may be positive, whereas others will be negative (Lai & Zhao, 2010). Further, negative perceptions

could relate to a variety of factors, some more serious than others. For example, Lai and Zhao (2010) that people who were dissatisfied with their calls to officers when requesting help and experiencing traffic stops usually led to negative attitudes towards the police. Alternatively, abuse at the hands of officers, or a violation of civil rights, could have a much more significant—and justified—impact on these perceptions. Regardless, it is important to note that individuals see the world through a relatively narrow lens.

Viewers can also be influenced by other factors. For example, demographic characteristics may serve to impact how someone views the field of policing. Researchers have primarily pointed to race and ethnicity, gender, and educational attainment as the most important of these factors (Lai & Zhao, 2010). For example, African Americans have generally been found to hold a less favorable view of law enforcement (Lai & Zhao, 2010). While some studies have indicated that gender does not have a substantial impact on attitudes, others have suggested that females have more favorable views of police (largely because males are more than likely to be involved in events that lead to arrests) (Lai & Zhao, 2010). In regard to educational attainment, some work has suggested that those of higher socioeconomic status may feature more positive views than their less fortunate counterparts (Lai & Zhao, 2010).

It is important to understand that recent years have seen an increase in the level of media attention directed toward law enforcement (Fisher, 2016). This is partially attributable to the increasing popularity of various social media applications, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Schneider et al., 2014). These applications present people with the opportunity to view news in real time, videos of various events, and public perceptions of them (Schneider, 2014). As such, law enforcement officers now face a stricter level of public scrutiny than ever

before (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). Their actions are viewed and scrutinized down to the smallest of details. Further, social media allows those without experience or knowledge in the field to still share views and perceptions as if they were fact. For example, when CNN posts social media clips of certain shows, like *60 Minutes*, they do not include in-depth analysis of how certain crimes are investigated, but instead highlight the drama that was involved in the crime (Beale, 2006). An individual may view that post and develop misconceptions due to a lack of information. The potential misrepresentation of law enforcement serves to make social media a less than ideal outlet for education and information (Beale, 2006).

Recent years have been relatively trying on U.S. society, as the Coronavirus pandemic has significantly influenced everyday life. However, other issues have risen to the forefront as well, including police brutality and potential biases toward certain groups (based upon demographic characteristics, such as race) (Weine et al., 2020). For example, the video of George Floyd dying while being held down by law enforcement officers in Minneapolis dominated the news cycle and social media feeds for several months (Weine et al., 2020). The massive outcry that resulted led to protests and riots across the United States. Many of these were led by the Black Lives Matter movement, though citizens without this affiliation also participated (Weine et al., 2020). Though much of their coverage was based solely on reporting the events, some researchers have suggested a secondary motivation of using his tragic death to promote affirmative action and influence public perceptions of law enforcement in a negative way (Reny & Newman, 2021). Further, it has been shown that focusing on such issues tends to elicit strong public response, which in turn facilitates the need for additional media coverage

(Beale, 2006). As such, portraying stories in a certain way can be self-serving for media outlets, as it increases viewership and profits (Beale, 2006).

The news media is certainly not alone in their impact on societal perceptions. As previously mentioned, movies and television shows can have a similar impact. These can present various stereotypes or purposely frame officers in a certain light (Gates, 2006, p. 5). For instance, movies, such as *Dirty Harry* or *The French Connection*, are classic examples of portraying rugged male cops that play by their own rules if it increases their odds of solving a case (Gates, 2006). This is not unique to motion pictures, as similar depictions are seen in television shows as well. For instance, *Criminal Minds* and *NCIS* highlight investigative teams that work to solve crimes in a relatively short time span (Durnal, 2010). It is not difficult to see how these portrayals can lead individuals—lacking in direct contact with law enforcement—to believe that such actions are typical in the real world. They perceive these officers as heroes who take charge of trying situations, leading the viewer to empathize with them and overlook the negative ramifications of such behavior.

Negative portrayals in popular entertainment programming are also common and may serve to influence views of law enforcement. For example, the film *Super Troopers* portrays Vermont state troopers as being lazy and focused solely on “having fun” (Morey, 2015). The film portrays the officers as lacking professionalism for a comedic effect, but this has the risk of fulfilling stereotypes that people may already have about law enforcement (Morey, 2015). Yet another film featuring a negative portrayal is *Let's Be Cops*. The film highlights two friends who pretend to be police officers during a costume party, and as a result become entangled with mob-affiliated criminals (Morey, 2015). It gives the audience the sense that effective training is not

needed to become a police officer, and that there is no risk involved in becoming one as well (Morey, 2015). A person could severely downplay the risks that are associated with police officers and their occupations as a result.

Understanding the impact that media can have on perceptions also requires a brief look at the psychology of individuals. For better or worse, people tend to put a great deal of trust in the media, specifically news outlets, even when they have an issue with credibility (Fisher, 2016). There have been studies that have focused on the psychological need to have certain trust in the media. One study found that individuals have to maintain certain psychological needs for trusting media: competence and autonomy (Wang & Li, 2014). They believed that this phenomenon was universal and added a potential explanation for the trust in media (Wang & Li, 2014). This trust can be problematic if constant exposure leads them to believe what they are hearing is unequivocally true (Fisher, 2016). This may be a minute example of how people can have an unhealthy trust for media outlets at all levels; however, it can produce a possible explanation for why people have specific feelings towards law enforcement in regard to their exposure to consuming forms of it on a routine basis.

It would be remiss to not consider the fact that law enforcement has also used the media to engage with citizens (Dai et al., 2017). Agencies have historically relied on the news and print media, but in recent years have also made use of social media platforms (ECSM, 2015). They do so in order to showcase successes, seek public assistance, and paint their officers in a positive light, among other motivations (ECSM, 2015). Social media in particular presents a means to establish positive relationships with citizens and increase trust by becoming more visible and transparent (ECSM, 2015). Certainly, some agencies are more inclined to use this strategy than

others, but more are becoming aware of the significant impact that it may have with each passing year (Bhattacharya, 2017).

In spite of the fact that media consumption is ubiquitous in modern society, it is important to note that not everyone consumes the same forms or consumes at the same frequency. Further, some individuals may be better able to objectively critique media that they encounter than others. This could be due to education, critical thinking skills, exposure to various points of view, or some other factor (Fisher, 2016). Regardless, the ability to parse out what is likely realistic, and what is biased or untrue, is uniquely important as it relates to perceptions of policing due to the nature of various forms of media. For example, producers have been known to change the degree of violence that is shown on network television shows in order to target certain audiences (Beale, 2006). Portrayals of how law enforcement officers respond to violence, criminals and victims can also be painted in a certain light to either entice viewers, or in some cases, frame societal expectations in line with those of the writers, directors, and producers (Beale, 2006). Such tactics can ultimately influence viewpoints, especially among those who do not have the appropriate knowledge to understand the lack of realism.

As touched on earlier in the chapter, these purposeful attempts at misinformation or bias are not restricted to fictional programming. There is evidence that large news media outlets and television networks may seek to influence public perceptions in certain ways. For example, certain news outlets will focus on the scandalous events that law enforcement is associated with rather than showing the entire situation in its original context (Beale, 2006). The OJ Simpson trial is a prime example, as the media focused on the wrongdoings of law enforcement instead of shedding light on the tragic murders of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman (Beale, 2006).

Though less common, local media outlets can also have an impact on perceptions of law enforcement. Data indicated that as much as 25% of local news stories focus on crime and related topics (Beale, 2006) and that this has increased over time (Beale, 2006). Research further suggests that the increase in local crime coverage did not originate from an increase in crime overall, but because of the overall increase in viewership that was interested in such stories (Beale, 2006). This in turn leads individuals to perceive more issues than are actually present. Perhaps more importantly, it could magnify the impact of each story discussing positive or negative actions on the part of officers, ultimately increasing the likelihood that individuals will generalize from one story to all who work in the field (Perlmutter, 2000).

The Current Study

Law enforcement plays an important role in the lives of communities across the United States. Because of its importance, news media outlets spend a significant amount of time discussing stories related to crime and officer actions. The societal interest that is created by these stories have led to a large number of movies and television shows focused on the work of officers. The advent of the internet and increasing popularity of social media have also provided new outlets for both positive and negative depictions of officers. Those interested in consuming this information do not have to look hard, nor do they have the ability to trust the information in the way that they once did due to the difficulty of separating fact from fiction in modern times. These numerous platforms all share their specific viewpoints on the topic of law enforcement in today's world, hoping to either objectively portray the field or slant public opinion in line with their own perceptions, and oftentimes biases.

Because of this phenomenon, it is important to continue to study the impacts of media on perceptions and how they serve to influence them. Some work has been done in this realm, but much more is needed. The current study sought to assist in achieving this goal by addressing the impact of various forms of media on college student perceptions of policing. Specifically, it attempted to understand how media exposure—controlling for various other factors—has helped frame the perceptions of those potentially seeking entrance into the field. To do so, it relied on a sample of criminal justice majors at East Tennessee State University, a public research institution located in Johnson City, Tennessee. Findings of the work helped develop an understanding of the forms of media that these students consume, how they perceive them, and how various factors have influenced their overall perceptions of the field of policing.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The previous chapter discussed the potential impact that media exposure can have on perceptions of law enforcement. Further, it highlighted the need to further research this impact by understanding how exposure influences the views of college students. The current chapter discusses previous research on the topic of public perceptions and the role of the media, among other key factors. It begins by highlighting work that has suggested the significant impact of media on perceptions before turning attention to studies that serve as the foundation for the current work.

As discussed in the initial chapter, a complex relationship exists between the media and law enforcement. Surette (2014) suggests that four forms of media have been most influential over time in terms of the development of public perceptions of policing. Three forms have historically been most prominent (sound, print and visual) and are referred to as legacy media (Surette, 2014). Visual media encompasses television programs and movies that depict various aspects of law enforcement, either in a positive or negative light. Print media includes both nonfiction (e.g., exposes or newspapers), and fictional offerings, such as detective novels (e.g., Sherlock Holmes). Sound media was considered to be least influential but included popular radio programs highlighting stories related to police work (Surette, 2014).

The fourth form, titled new media, has emerged in recent years. This class encompasses internet and other technologies that have presented innovative ways to be exposed to various types of information (Surette, 2014). For example, video games revolving around crime and policing are more popular than ever before. Websites detailing the news of the day are easily

accessed by people around the world. Further, social media has presented the opportunity to be exposed to stories in real time, as well as various opinions related to them. Regardless of form, Surette (2014) suggests that exposure could blur the lines of current reality because of the amount and types of media people now consume.

Perlmutter (2000) adds to this complexity by discussing how police officers are often influenced by their representation in the media. Studying officers in St. Louis, Missouri, he found that most were aware of their portrayal, and that over time, they began to conduct themselves differently based upon these portrayals. Perlmutter (2000) also discussed how officers came to deal with media and public backlash as a result of notable events, such as the Rodney King Incident in Los Angeles. Of importance to the current study, this points to the potential for media to influence the public, which in turn influences officer actions. Over time those police responses may serve to change public perceptions in an almost cyclical fashion.

In line with this thinking, officers may also begin to embrace a crime-fighter persona if they perceive the public to expect it based upon popular media portrayals (Gates, 2006). For example, movies like *Die Hard* present officers as superheroes with the ability to tackle entire criminal organizations. Though the officer depicted in the film abided by the law, his actions may have led impressionable individuals to believe that this is realistic and expected of officers. Other films focus on the unethical and oftentimes illegal actions of officers, though still painting them as crime-fighters defending the line between order and anarchy. Regardless of approach, it is possible that these films influence both citizens and officers alike, pointing to the complex role that media can play in our understanding of policing.

Fisher (2016) discussed the credibility that some people associate with the media and how much trust they have in those media outlets. Though the work did not focus wholly on law enforcement perceptions, it did serve to increase our understanding of the media's impact on beliefs. Fisher (2016) found that the way trust is defined today in the digital era has to be reconsidered because the complexity of trust has changed. In addition, he found that source and message credibility has been more suspect in recent times. Put differently, it appears that individuals are more trusting of information presented to them. According to the work, this can include law enforcement perceptions, since the media as a whole tends to portray policing in both negative and positive lights (Fisher, 2016).

Other works have focused specifically on the influence of media on perceptions of the criminal justice system. It has been found that the media (or at least some factions of it) tries to distort the image of law enforcement and represent it in a way that is at odds with real-life settings (Beale, 2006). This includes manipulating depictions of violence in order to increase ratings and compete with other news sites. For example, the OJ Simpson trial was covered by every news media network, with many dedicating a third of their broadcast time to the developing case. Beale (2016) suggests that they capitalize on scandalous events because it serves to captivate audiences and increase ratings. He also posits that the popularity of true crime shows and programs such as *60 Minutes* arise for similar reasons (Beale, 2006). Of importance to the current work, it has been found that these programs do not present in-depth analysis and instead focus primarily on dramatic entertainment (Beale, 2006). This is problematic due to the fact that viewers will not gain an understanding of context or the work that happens behind the

scenes. Further, they may be led to believe that certain cases or actions on the part of officers are commonplace, when in fact they were chosen due to their unique or abnormal nature.

Gonzalez (2016) further explored how visual media can alter attitudes toward law enforcement. Four separate groups were exposed to positive and negative visual media related to law enforcement to assess whether exposure would change participant perceptions. The results showed that there was an effect witnessed for every group. For example, one group was shown a video of an officer berating a detained individual in a derogatory manner, resulting in negative impressions. This serves to demonstrate how even a short video can alter perceptions in spite of a lifetime of socialization. It is important to note that similar findings emerged for groups that were exposed to videos of positive police-citizen interactions. As such, it appears that views can be quickly altered in either a negative or positive direction (Gonzalez, 2016).

Chapman et al. (2002) sought to understand what impact media exposure has on attitudes toward the criminal justice system, as well as how it influences perceived knowledge of the system. The researchers surveyed over 1,000 members of the general public on a variety of topics. Results indicated that overall knowledge of the criminal justice system was poor among the sample of participants. On the whole, the group had little prior knowledge of crime trends and sentencing practices. For example, most believed that crime was increasing during a period when it was in fact declining.

To explore how exposure may serve to influence these preconceptions, the research team selected a subsample of 220 people and randomly assigned them to three groups tasked with reviewing educational information. One group received a booklet, one attended a seminar, and one reviewed a brief video. Each of these was designed to provide a better understanding of how

the criminal justice system operated. Results of this experiment showed that 44% of those in the subsample developed a more positive view after reviewing the materials and indicated that each of the options was effective in eliciting change. While Chapman et al. (2002) did not directly assess the impact of previous media exposure, their work did highlight how individual perceptions of policing can be changed over time when presented with positive examples.

Dowler & Zawilski (2007) are credited with conducting one of the key studies in this area, as they sought to examine the impact of media consumption on perceptions of police misconduct and discrimination. The researchers conducted telephone interviews with a random sample of 1,011 people in order to gather data for the study. Among their initial findings was the revelation that people who frequently viewed the news and television shows that involved crime-solving were more likely to report police misconduct as a common occurrence. They also found that two control variables—previous real-world experience with law enforcement and race—served as predictors of individual attitudes.

Of interest, multivariate analysis indicated that media exposure may have had minimal impact on attitudes and perceptions when accounting for these two factors (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Put differently, variables such as race, and prior police contact served to predict views more accurately. Final analysis revealed that significant media exposure (when controlling for other predictors) only led to the belief that wealthy individuals were treated more favorably (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007).

This is not the only work to indicate that other factors may also be influential. Lai and Zhao (2010) used three different models to showcase people's attitudes towards law enforcement and how various factors served to influence them. The research team focused on two key factors

in their work: general attitudes and specific trust towards the police (Lai & Zhao, 2010). In doing so they assessed the impact of neighborhoods, demographic characteristics, and past, personal interactions with officers. A random sample of residents in the Houston, Texas metropolitan area resulted in 756 participants providing data through a telephone survey (Lai & Zhao, 2010). Analysis of the data indicated that participants had generally favorable views of the local department. However, some variation was witnessed when exploring demographics and their impact. For example, the results showed both African Americans and Hispanics had lower scores on their general attitudes towards police when compared to the respondents who were White (Lai & Zhao, 2010). This indicates that some interplay may exist between both demographic characteristics and media consumption in terms of the development of perceptions.

As previously discussed, the current study seeks to explore how media consumption—and other factors—influence perceptions of college students as it relates to policing. Some work has explored this topic in the past. For example, Edwards (2007), sampling undergraduate students at a regional university in the Southeast, found that audience traits and media consumption preferences were influential in conditioning attitudes. Specifically, results revealed that media consumption did have some effect on fear of crime and perceptions of law enforcement.

A similar study by Claxton (2018) surveyed 239 participants at the University of North Florida to discern how students perceived racial injustice (as it relates to policing) and what factors influenced those perceptions. Worth noting, the majority of the participants were female and Caucasian (Claxton, 2018). The study found that most of the participants perceived the police as having legitimacy (Claxton, 2018). In spite of the fact that most reported significant

exposure to social media—and that they commonly used it to become informed on news stories—no significant impact was found between media exposure and perceptions. Rather, the researchers found that a greater need for authority—and an obligation to follow it—were most influential in conditioning perceptions of police (Claxton, 2018).

Sharp (2019) built upon previous studies by assessing perceptions of law enforcement among students at three different community colleges located in Kansas. A total of 159 people submitted survey data. Similar to Claxton's (2018) work, the majority of participants were female (78%) and Caucasian at (77.4%). However, Sharp (2019) focused specifically on perceptions of police effectiveness. Results revealed mixed findings. No significant differences in perceptions of effectiveness emerged in terms of the demographic variables (e.g., gender, race). However, and of interest to the current work, media exposure was found to be impactful. Those who reported a greater frequency of consumption tended to feature more positive views on police effectiveness (Sharp, 2019).

Other researchers, attempting to further explore the impacts of race, have focused on samples comprised solely of minority participants. For example, Franklin et al. (2019) surveyed 246 African American students, the majority of whom identified as female, on a range of measures related to satisfaction with law enforcement. One key finding was that those who reported prior negative interactions with the police featured significantly different perceptions of law enforcement. However, in relation to media consumption, no significant impacts were found.

Mbuba (2010) explored differences in attitudes toward law enforcement among groups of college students. The sample came from 365 students enrolled at a four-year university in the

Midwest, the majority of whom (53%) were not criminal justice majors. The study's findings were for the most part in line with previous works. It was found that the main predictor of perceptions of law enforcement was the racial background of the participant. Those who experienced or perceived mistreatment (either in person or through media exposure) were more likely to feature negative perceptions of officers and departments (Mbuba, 2010). Minority respondents were found (as a group) to believe the police provided an important service to the community (Mbuba, 2010).

Finally, Foster (2019) surveyed 792 participants at two different state universities to more directly determine whether media consumption featured a relationship with perceptions of policing. It was revealed that exposure to television, internet-based media, and news entertainment had no influence on how a respondent viewed law enforcement (Foster, 2019). However, when exploring the relationship between exposure and perceptions of the criminal justice system in general, some significant findings emerged. Specifically, those who consumed media more frequently had a more positive perception of the system as a whole.

The Current Study

Taken together, the studies discussed in this chapter indicate that perceptions of law enforcement may be influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from demographic characteristics to media exposure. Some work has explored perceptions among college students, but much remains to be done. The current study sought to assist in building a knowledge base regarding the topic by assessing how numerous forms of media may play a role in the development of perceptions. In addition, it sought to control for other factors found by previous researchers to be

influential in socialization, such as demographic characteristics (e.g., race) and prior police contact. To do so, a series of research questions were established (detailed in Table 1 below).

Table 1: *Research Questions*

R1: How do students perceive law enforcement as a field?
R2: What forms of media related to policing do students consume, and how frequently do they consume them?
R3: How realistic do students perceive coverage of law enforcement across the various forms of media?
R4: How do students perceive portrayals (e.g., positive, or negative) of law enforcement across various forms of media?
R5: How impactful are various forms of media related to law enforcement in terms of students' desires to enter the field?
R6: What impact do various other factors (e.g., demographics) play in conditioning responses to each of the aforementioned research questions?

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on previous studies that addressed perceptions of law enforcement. It began by further discussing how the media may impact these perceptions, focusing on forms of media, the topics generally covered and how perceptions develop as a result of exposure to them. The second part of the review explored the psychology of individuals, the amount of trust they put into the media and how this can influence views of law enforcement. This was followed by a discussion of the various studies to date that have explored how both media exposure and other factors (e.g., demographics, prior police contact) influence perceptions. Finally, the key research

questions of the current study were highlighted. The chapter that follows will address how the study's methodology allowed for each of these to be explored.

Chapter Three

Methodology

As discussed in the previous chapter, a series of research questions were established to explore the various factors (e.g., media exposure, demographic characteristics) that may influence student perceptions of the police. This chapter discusses the methodology utilized in the current study. To address the research questions, data were gathered from a sample of students enrolled in criminal justice classes attending East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. The institution is considered a regional university, with an enrollment of approximately 14,000 students. The criminal justice department houses both undergraduate and graduate degrees, with a combined enrollment of nearly 400 students across both programs.

The sampling strategy involved reaching out to all professors of criminal justice courses during the Fall 2021 academic term. Instructors were provided with a summary of the study and asked to forward a recruitment email to students enrolled in their courses. Students who received these emails were instructed that eligibility required that they were over 18 years of age at the time and that they were currently enrolled in at least one criminal justice course. They were also informed that no incentives were being offered for participation. Over 100 students (N=104) ultimately chose to participate and were directed to complete the survey using *SurveyMonkey*. Of these, 89 provided complete data—constituting the final sample.

Respondents were asked to respond to a brief survey containing approximately 20 questions (including several in matrix-style format) that were designed to explore a variety of topics (see Appendix A for the complete survey document). The first section sought information regarding demographic characteristics. Specifically, questions relating to age, gender, ethnicity, and prior police contact were asked. The second section of the survey was in matrix-style format

and sought to explore general perceptions of the policing field. These questions were drawn from scales used in previous research on the topic (see Edwards, 2007; Jones-Brown, 2000 for examples). This was followed by another matrix that asked respondents to indicate the number of hours that they spent consuming various forms of law enforcement-related media (news, television, movies, podcasts, or other) on a monthly basis. This time frame (monthly) was selected to provide a better overall understanding of consumption due to the fact that individual weeks may vary.

The third section asked respondents to indicate how realistic they perceived police coverage to be across the various forms of media assessed in the previous section. They were asked to respond to Likert-style items ranging from *not realistic at all* to *highly realistic*. The fourth section also made use of a matrix (with identical forms of media). However, students were asked to assess (based on their perceptions) how media portrayed officers in terms of negativity and positivity. A Likert-style response system was provided, with options ranging from *highly negative* to *highly positive*. Finally, the last section of the survey was targeted at only those considering a future career in law enforcement. Those who indicated yes were asked to rate the various forms of media in terms of their impact on the desire to enter the field (with Likert options ranging from *not influential at all* to *highly influential*).

Dependent Variables

Five dependent variables were utilized in the current study. The first made use of the survey questions related to perceptions of law enforcement. Eight Likert-scale questions were included in this section, with examples including the following: (1) *My local police department does a good job*, (2) *Police provide services that residents want*, and (3) *I have a lot of respect for the police in my town*. Each of these items were assessed individually to explore mean

responses, and then combined into a scale to provide a single measure of *police perceptions*. Reliability diagnostics indicated that the scale was suitable for analysis (Cronbach's Alpha=.93).

The second dependent measure assessed the consumption of various forms of media (related to law enforcement stories) by respondents. A total of 13 different forms of media were explored (e.g., local news, reality shows, magazines, podcasts), with respondents indicating how many hours per month they consumed each. This provided the opportunity to discern (for the sample) which were most frequently consumed. It also allowed for the creation of a dependent measure (*media consumption*) that could be utilized to assess overall consumption. This was achieved by aggregating the total number of hours across all forms.

The third dependent measure focused on the level of realism that respondents perceived in relation to the various forms of law-enforcement related media. The same 13 were explored with the respondents giving feedback on how realistic they perceived the portrayals to be. Response categories for the *realism* measure were in Likert-scale format and ranged from (1) *not realistic at all* to (5) *highly realistic*. To create a single measure for *realism*, these items were combined into a single scale (Cronbach's Alpha=.84).

The fourth dependent measure examined the perceptions that the respondents had on the various forms of media being explored in the study. They were asked to indicate how they perceived media portrayals utilizing Likert-scale response categories. Five options were available, ranging from (1) *highly negative* to (5) *highly positive*. To create a single measure for *perception*, these items were combined into a single scale (Cronbach's Alpha=.83).

The fifth, and final, dependent measure addressed how influential the various forms of media were in promoting interest in law enforcement careers. The 13 different media forms were once again used to explore this measure for *interest*. Students were asked to respond to each

using Likert-scale options. These ranged from (1) *not influential at all* to (5) *highly influential*. In line with the other dependent measures, these items were combined to create a single measure for *interest* (Cronbach's Alpha=.91).

Independent Variables

Several independent variables were assessed in the current study. These were largely drawn from previous research and focused on other factors (outside of media exposure) that may serve to influence perceptions of the police. The first variable, *age*, measured how old respondents were (in years) at the time of survey completion. The second, *gender*, provided respondents with categories to select from (Female, Male, Other, Prefer not to Say). Based on a lack of responses for the other categories, *gender* was recoded to a dichotomous variable (0=Male; 1=Female). The third, *race*, provided respondents with several categories to select from (Black, White, Asian, American Indian, or Alaska Native, Other). *Race* was recoded as a dichotomous variable due to a lack of variation within the sample. White respondents were grouped into one category (0), whereas non-white respondents (Black, Asian, American Indian, or Alaska Native, Other) were grouped into the second (1).

The next independent measure focused on *academic standing*, which was measured at the ordinal level (1 = Freshman, 2 = Sophomore, 3 = Junior, 4 = Senior, 5 = Graduate Student). Two different questions assessed students' programs of study. The first asked them to identify their current major, with options including Criminal Justice & Criminology, Psychology, Sociology, Social Work, Political Science, and Other. The second asked those who were majoring in something other than criminal justice and criminology if it was there minor. For purposes of analysis, the responses for these two questions were combined to create a single dichotomous

measure for *program*. Students enrolled as either a criminal justice and criminology major or minor were assigned to one category (1), while all others were assigned to a second (0).

Political affiliation was a categorical measure with response options for Republican, Democrat, Independent, and Other. In line with past research, a final measure for *political affiliation* was operationalized as a dichotomous variable. One (1) value were applied to those identifying as Republican, while zero (0) values were assigned to all others. Two questions addressed criminal justice experience, both of which were dichotomous with yes and no answer options. The first addressed whether the respondent had ever been employed in the criminal justice field. The second asked whether any immediate family members had ever been employed. These questions were combined to create a single *criminal justice experience* measure with those answering no to both questions receiving a 0 score and a yes to either question receiving a score of 1. The final independent variable addressed *direct contact* by asking respondents how many times they had been in direct contact with an on-duty police officer in the previous 12 months. As such, it was measured at the ratio level.

Plan of Analysis

The analysis for the current study proceeded in a series of three stages. The initial stage involved the presentation of descriptive statistics designed to provide an overview of the sample. The second stage explored the mean scores associated with each of the items used to create the study's dependent measures. Finally, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were employed to determine the impact of various individual characteristics on each of the outcomes of interest.

Chapter Summary

This section discussed how the methodology of the current study was structured. It provided an overview of the sampling strategy and survey document. The dependent and independent variables were also discussed. Finally, it addresses the manner in which the analysis was conducted to allow for each of the research questions to be addressed. The following chapter will cover the results of each of these statistical tests.

Chapter Four

Results

The previous chapter outlined the methods employed to answer the study's research questions. This chapter provides an overview of the findings. Results are separated into several sections. First, descriptive statistics will be presented for each of the independent measures. Next, the dependent measures and items used to create them will be highlighted, with a focus on the mean scores for each item. Finally, the results of a series of regression models will be relayed.

Sample Statistics

The first section that will be discussed includes the descriptive statistics for the study's independent variables. The average age of the respondents was slightly over 23 years old ($M=23.17$). In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were female (72.7%) and white (92.1%). As for academic standing, the majority of students who completed the survey were juniors (39.3%), followed by seniors (32.6%), graduate students (13.5%), sophomores (11.2%) and freshman (3.4%). Criminal justice majors/minors represented 62.5% of the sample. Slightly over half (51.7%) identified as Republicans, while 61.8% said they had no family or personal experience in the criminal justice field. Finally, the majority (72.9%) reported having had contact with an officer in the previous year (see Table 2 for a complete summary).

Table 2: Sample Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender		
Male	24	27.3
Female	64	61.5
Race		
White	82	92.1
Non-White	7	7.9
Academic Standing		
Freshman	3	3.4
Sophomore	10	11.2
Junior	35	39.3
Senior	29	32.6
Graduate Student	12	13.5
Criminal Justice Major/Minor		
Yes	65	62.5
No	39	37.5
Political Affiliation		
Republican	46	51.7
Other	43	48.3
Personal Experience in CJ		
Yes	34	38.2
No	55	61.8
Contact with Police		
Yes	51	72.9
No	19	27.1

Students Perception of Law Enforcement Currently (Descriptive Statistics)

As discussed, the first dependent variable focused on student's perceptions (*police* perceptions) of law enforcements and made use of a nine-item (9) scale. As displayed in Table 3, students had a moderate perception of local law enforcement when items were combined to form a single measure ($M = 3.67$). However, some variation existed among the individual items. Higher scores were seen for *comfortable asking police for assistance* ($M = 3.96$), *local police do a good job* ($M = 3.89$), and *high respect for police in your town* ($M = 3.98$). Lower scores were seen for *police response to minorities is fair* ($M = 3.21$) and *police have a good reason to stop people* ($M = 2.92$).

Table 3: Various Perceptions of Law Enforcement

Perception of Law Enforcement	Mean
Local Police does a good job	3.89
Comfortable asking police for assistance	3.96
Police response to minorities is fair	3.21
High respect for police in your town	3.98
Police have good reason to stop people	2.92
Police provides services people want	3.66
You would feel bad disobeying an order	3.73
Police should punish you for being bad	3.97
Overall Police Perceptions Scale	3.67

Students Consumption of Law Enforcement Related Media

The second dependent variable related to how many hours respondents spent consuming various forms of law-enforcement related media per month. Table 4 contains a full summary of the mean hours for each form. Television dramas (e.g., *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, *NCIS*) were most popular on a per month basis ($M = 11.26$), followed by documentary shows (e.g., *48 Hours*, *To Catch A Predator*) ($M = 8.77$) and national news ($M=6.39$). The other side of spectrum showed that magazines ($M = .40$) and newspapers ($M = .67$) had the least amount of consumption on a per month average. Aggregating responses to create a composite measure of total *media consumption* revealed that the average participant consumed over 55 hours ($M=55.08$) per month.

Table 4: Consumption of Law Enforcement Related Media

Types of Media	Mean
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times News, etc.)	.67
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)	4.76
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)	6.39
Magazines	.40

Television Dramas (CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)	11.26
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911! etc.)	4.04
Reality Shows (Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)	3.47
Documentary Shows (48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)	8.77
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)	5.01
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)	5.18
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)	5.42
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)	5.94
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night-Stalker, The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)	5.78
Total Hours of Monthly Consumption	55.08

Students' Belief of Realism in Portrayals

The next dependent variable addressed student's perceptions regarding how realistic media coverage of law enforcement is. A full summary of the data for the items contained in this measure can be found in Table 5 below. Data indicate that students believed that podcasts ($M = 3.64$), documentary shows ($M = 3.59$), and local news outlets ($M = 3.51$) were most realistic. Alternatively, scores suggested that they did not find comedy movies ($M = 1.50$) or comedy television shows ($M = 1.60$) to be realistic portrayals of law enforcement. Creation of a single composite measure for *realism* revealed an average value of 2.61, indicating that as a group students questioned the overall realism of law enforcement media portrayals.

Table 5: Realistic Portrayals of Law Enforcement

Types of Media	Mean
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times News, etc.)	3.39
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)	3.51
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)	2.87
Magazines	2.27
Television Dramas (CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)	2.03
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911! etc.)\	1.60
Reality Shows (Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)	2.93
Documentary Shows (48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)	3.59
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)	1.92
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)	1.65
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)	1.50
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)	3.41
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night-Stalker, The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)	3.64
How realistic are portrayals of law enforcement (Scale)?	2.61

Students' Perceptions of Portrayals

The fourth dependent variable was perceptions (positive or negative) of the *portrayals* of law enforcement in various forms of media. As seen in Table 6, these perceptions differed based on the specific media they were asked about. Students had an overall positive perception of portrayals in television dramas ($M = 3.79$), documentary films (3.60), and reality shows ($M = 3.52$). The negative perceptions from the portrayals of law enforcement were attributed to comedy movies ($M = 2.94$), magazines ($M = 2.35$), and national news outlets ($M = 2.01$). The

composite measure for *portrayals* revealed an overall mean score of 3.15, indicating a rather neutral stance for the sample.

Table 6: Positive/Negative Portrayals of Law Enforcement

Types of Media	Mean
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times News, etc.)	3.26
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)	3.27
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)	2.01
Magazines	2.35
Television Dramas (CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)	3.79
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911! etc.)	3.36
Reality Shows (Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)	3.52
Documentary Shows (48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)	3.47
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)	3.09
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)	3.20
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)	2.94
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)	3.36
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night-Stalker, The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)	3.60
<i>Portrayals Scale</i>	3.15

Influence of Media on Career Aspirations

The final dependent variable focused on the role that media plays in influencing desires to enter the law enforcement field (*influence*). Only students who reported an interest in the career field (N=51; 49% of the sample) were asked to provide responses for the items. Table 7 depicts the findings for each form. Students were most likely to be influenced by documentary shows for television (M = 3.46), documentary movies (M = 3.32), and reality shows (M = 2.97).

The least amount of *influence* that students cited was from magazines ($M = 1.40$), comedy movies ($M = 1.77$), and newspapers ($M = 1.81$). The composite measure for *influence* revealed an overall mean score of 2.32, indicating that on the whole media plays a lesser role in driving interest in the field.

Table 7: Influence on Law Enforcement Interest

Types of Media	Mean
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times News, etc.)	1.81
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)	2.25
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)	2.48
Magazines	1.40
Television Dramas (CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)	2.88
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911! etc.)\	1.95
Reality Shows (Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)	2.97
Documentary Shows (48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)	3.46
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)	2.06
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)	2.04
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)	1.77
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)	2.84
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night-Stalker, The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)	3.32
<i>Influence Scale</i>	2.32

Multivariate Models

As discussed, a series of four linear (OLS) regression models were explored in order to determine whether demographic characteristics served to influence any of the dependent variables. The first model assessed *perceptions*. A full summary of the findings can be found in

Table 8 below. Assessment of the adjusted R^2 indicated that the model explained 18.6% of the variation in the outcome. However, only one of the variables of interest (*political affiliation*) emerged as statistically significant ($B=.73$; $p>.05$), indicating that Republicans had more positive perceptions of the police.

Table 8: Linear Regression Model for *Perceptions*

Variable	B	t	P-Value
Constant	2.87	5.78	.000
Race	-2.35	-.550	.584
Gender	-.243	-.968	.337
Academic Standing	.158	1.51	.133
CJ Major/Minor	.319	1.24	.219
Political Affiliation	.727*	3.24	.002*
Personal Experience	-.245	-1.05	.298
Police Contact	-.121	-.496	.622

Note: * $P<.05$

The second linear regression model examined *portrayals*. A full summary can be found in Table 9 below. Assessment of the adjusted R^2 indicated that the model only explained 1.0% of the variation in the outcome. In addition, none of the included variables of interest emerged as statistically significant within the model.

Table 9: Linear Regression Model for *Portrayals*

Variable	B	t	P-Value
Constant	3.69	11.65	.000
Race	.18	.55	.344
Gender	-.15	-.95	.584
Academic Standing	-.07	-1.08	.284
CJ Major/Minor	.11	.69	.492
Political Affiliation	-.24	-1.73	.088
Personal Experience	.07	.50	.619
Police Contact	-.22	-1.36	.178

The third linear regression model related to the student's *consumption* of police-related media. A full summary can be found below (Table 10). The model revealed an adjusted R² measure indicated that this model explained 4.3% of the variation in the outcome. None of the variables of interest were found to be statistically significant within this model.

Table 10: Linear Regression Model for *Consumption*

Variable	B	t	P-Value
Constant	118.91	2.16	.036
Race	-22.59	-.47	.634
Gender	-4.84	-.19	.847
Academic Standing	-11.38	-1.06	.293
CJ Major/Minor	-1.40	-0.54	.957
Political Affiliation	-20.28	-.87	.387

Personal Experience	37.81	1.51	.136
Police Contact	-27.28	-1.09	.280

The final linear regression assessed *realism*. A summary can be found in Table 11 below. Approximately 8% of the variation in the outcome was explained by the included predictors. However, no variables of interest were found to be statistically significant in this specific model.

Table 11: Linear Regression Model for *Realism*

Variable	B	t	P-Value
Constant	2.86	8.25	.000
Race	.04	.12	.990
Gender	-2.12	-1.21	.230
Academic Standing	.10	.13	.894
CJ Major/Minor	-.05	-.31	.753
Political Affiliation	.31	.19	.843
Personal Experience	-.02	-.13	.894
Police Contact	-.14	-.79	.428

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the results for the current study. It began by discussing the characteristics of the sample. Items comprising the various dependent measures were then discussed, with a focus on key differences and overall mean scores (when creating composite measures). Finally, a series of linear regression models were computed, with results

displayed in the included tables. The next (and final) chapter will attempt to place these results into context and discuss the limitations of the study, as well as possibilities for future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion

The final chapter seeks to highlight how the current study's findings relate to previous studies that were conducted in a similar manner. It will focus on what the findings reveal regarding the sample's overall perceptions of the relationship between media and law enforcement. This will be achieved by discussing the results of the different models that were shown in the previous chapter and how the findings may be similar to, or differ from, previous works. In addition, several limitations of the current work will be discussed, as well as realizations that could provide the groundwork for future research to be conducted in this specific area. As discussed in the second chapter, there is existing research that has explored perceptions of law enforcement and the impact that media exposure may have on them. However, the majority of these studies focused on specific aspects of the media, while the current study attempted to examine it as a whole. Furthermore, the current work sought to understand how perceptions may be influenced among college students, a topic that has not been well-researched to date.

The first research question sought to explore student perceptions of law enforcement by relying on an established scale previously used in the work of Edwards (2007). A series of Likert-scale items were assessed focusing on aspects related to trust and confidence in the police. The overall composite mean suggested that students perceived law enforcement in a relatively positive light. However, some differences were present for the individual items. Students were most likely to report being comfortable asking police for assistance and that they felt that police did a good job. On the other hand, they reported lower values when asked whether they thought that the police had a good reason to stop people and whether they respond to minorities fairly.

To further explore perceptions, a linear regression model containing several possible predictors was explored. As discussed in Chapter 4, only one variable emerged as significant. Students who reported being conservative in political orientation were significantly more likely to feature higher scores on the composite measure. This finding somewhat differed from the work of Edwards (2007) and others (see Sharp, 2019 for an example), who found that media consumption and fear of crime were the most influential predictors of perceptions. It also differs from other research in that no impact was found for variables such as prior police contact, gender, race, or college major. As discussed within the review of the literature, several works have found demographic characteristics (Lai & Zhao, 2010; Mbuba, 2010) and police contact (Franklin et al., 2019) to impact individual perceptions. The lack of significance in the current study may partially relate to the low sample size. For example, there was a lack of diversity as it pertains to race in the current work. That may have prevented the ability of the model to distinguish an impact.

As for the impact of college major, it is worth noting that most participants were criminal justice majors or minors, and that all students were enrolled in criminal justice courses. As such, all likely featured some interest in pursuing a career in the field and as such were less inclined to report negative perceptions. Finally, in relation to police contact, the survey did not distinguish the nature of the contact. Many students may have interacted with officers in a positive fashion, through internships, “ride along” or guest speakers. Previous research has been more specific in terms of questioning, asking whether contact was in the form of being pulled over, questioned, or arrested. It is likely that such forms would have drastically different impacts on perceptions.

The second research question focused on consumption of law enforcement related media. Students were provided a list of various forms, such as podcasts, local news, documentaries, and

magazines and asked to indicate how many hours per month that they viewed each. Findings revealed that the average participant consumed approximately 55 hours per month. Some differences emerged for the individual types. For example, newspapers and magazines were not very popular among the sample, whereas television dramas, documentary shows, and national news featured relatively high overall means. Previous research has failed to distinguish consumption by category, focusing only on overall consumption. As such, the current work offers much to our understanding of the issue. It appears that young person's favor certain forms, many of which would be classified as new media (Surette, 2014). Legacy media, such as newspaper articles and magazines appear to garner little interest among this group, a finding in line with the work of Surette (2014).

To further explore media consumption, a linear regression model containing identical independent measures was conducted with the composite measure for total consumption as the dependent variable. None of the included variables emerged as statistically significant. Since this is the first attempt to explore this question, none of the previous research would indicate why the lack of significance was present. Similar to the previous model, the non-significance for certain variables (e.g., race) is likely explained by the lack of variation within the sample. As for others, the findings may relate to the fact that all students were enrolled in criminal justice coursework, and that young individuals have been found to consume many forms of media at higher rates than their older counterparts (Brady, 2007) It seems likely that consumption of criminal justice stories relates more to general interest in the field and even factors such as amount of free time. With this in mind, future studies should likely include measures for employment status and whether the student is enrolled in coursework on a full-time or part-time basis.

The third research question dealt with how college students perceived the portrayals of law enforcement across the different media-based platforms. Students were once again provided a series of items representing the different types of media outlets but asked whether they perceived them as painting law enforcement in a positive or negative light. Findings showed that the sample perceived the portrayals of law enforcement to be somewhat positive, as indicated by the mean score of 3.15. Television comedies and television movies were considered to paint policing more often in a negative light; however, documentary shows, and movies were perceived to provide positive representations of law enforcement. Previous research has looked at the perceptions that can be associated with certain portrayals of law enforcement. Specifically, Morey (2015) found that comedy movies that included law enforcement were known to give people a negative perception of them. This finding appears to extend to the current research.

To further explore perceptions of portrayals, a linear regression model containing identical independent measures was conducted with the composite measure for portrayals as the dependent variable. There were no variables that emerged as statistically significant. Previous research has suggested that people do have negative perceptions of law enforcement based on certain media portrayals when they were represented in certain forms of media (see Morey, 2015 for an example). However, most forms of media (e.g., podcasts, newspapers, drama movies) have not been addressed to date, lending little to our knowledge of whether this finding is generalizable. However, once again a lack of variation in demographics—combined with the low overall sample size—could mean that the findings of the study do not represent actual views for most individuals in this age group. Future studies may offer much to our understanding of this topic.

The fourth research question focused on how students perceived realism within portrayals in the media. Put differently, they were asked to assess how realistic stories were in their minds. The findings revealed that the students in this survey perceived the portrayals of law enforcement to be moderately unrealistic (mean of 2.61 on the scale). Television comedies, comedy movies, and action movies were perceived to be the least realistic according to the results. On the other hand, documentary shows were shown to be perceived as the most realistic. Previous research has suggested that media (in many forms) tends to focus on the sensational side of police work, neglecting to focus on the facts and day-to-day operations of those employed in the field (Beale, 2006). This may explain the findings in the current study. On the contrary, documentary movies are perceived by most to lack sensationalism and focus primarily on telling stories the way they happened (Barbas et al, 2009). It appears that those surveyed in this study agree with that assumption.

To further explore how students perceived realism, a linear regression model containing identical independent measures was conducted with the composite measure for realism as the dependent variable. None of the variables included emerged as statistically significant. Similar to the previous models, the non-significance for certain variables (e.g., race) is likely explained by the lack of variation within the sample. However, it may also be explained through our understanding of societal perceptions of the media. For example, most studies find that people are more critical in recent years, not embracing media presentations as fact and instead questioning the content that they view (Beale, 2006). Such rationalizations may not be well-explained by the demographic (and other) variables explored in these models. Even those that may play a role (such as age) were not able to be explored due to the lack of variation in the sample (most individuals being within the typical college age range).

The fifth research question focused on the interest that students had in pursuing a career in criminal justice and how this may be influenced by media portrayals. Findings revealed that the sample, taken as a whole, did not perceive the media to be very influential in their career plans. Comedy movies were cited as having the least amount of influence for their pursuance of a career in criminal justice, while documentary shows had the highest amount of influence. One previous study has been conducted on this topic, finding that audience traits and media consumption preferences were influential in conditioning attitudes (Edwards, 2007). However, this work did not explore the various forms of media, as was done in the current study. It may be that the impact of documentary shows, and other forms that are influential, serves to mask the lack of impact for other forms of media. Future research with larger samples, and also utilizing varying forms of media, should shed further light on this possibility.

Ultimately, the current study revealed few significant findings. In many ways this runs contradictory to the literature as a whole. For example, while Dowler & Zawilski (2007) found that media exposure had little to no impact on the perceptions people had on law enforcement, they did find that race and prior police contact did condition perceptions those people had towards law enforcement (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Lai and Zhao (2010) found that ethnicity was influential as well, as African American and Hispanics had lower scores on their perceptions of law enforcement compared to other groups (Lai & Zhao, 2010). However, a few works have reached similar conclusions, as Claxton (2018) found few connections between media and perceptions and Sharp (2019) revealed no significant findings between demographics and individual beliefs. Though the current study may offer support for these findings, much more research is needed on the topic.

Limitations of the Current Study

There are some limitations that this study featured that need to be properly discussed. Mainly, the sample size (N=104) for the current study was relatively small in comparison to previous works on the topic. In addition, only 89 participants submitted data for the majority of the questions. It is likely that this hindered the ability for the regression models to identify impactful variables. Second, participants were drawn from a single university, and all were actively enrolled in criminal justice courses as the time the survey was administered. This could certainly influence perceptions, as university characteristics (and the fact that all at least had an interest in the criminal justice system) may make respondents qualitatively different than others within this age group. The lack of diversity for the sample was also problematic, as the majority of those who participated were white and female. This too may have impacted the results of the models.

Directions for Future Research

Future researchers should consider approaching the nature of the work in a manner that maximizes response rate and ensures variation in the sample studied. Data for the current work were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that many students featured altered schedules. Further, a lack of in-person attendance meant that group-administered surveys (which feature higher response rates) were not possible. Future studies may seek to take this approach. In addition, they are advised to consider a different form of sampling. Oversampling from individuals in minority groups may allow for the ability to better assess the impact of variables such as race on the outcomes in question. Finally, future research should continue to explore various forms of media as opposed to utilizing a single question to assess exposure. It is likely

that doing so, combined with improved methodology, will present the ability to further our knowledge on perceptions of law enforcement and how media exposure may influence them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study sought to explore the impact of various factors on college student perceptions of law enforcement-related media. Ultimately, only of the predictor variable explored in the study emerged as statistically significant, and in only one model. As such, it appears that demographic characteristics may not play a significant role in conditioning perceptions. However, the limitations of the current work—namely those related to sample size and a lack of variation for several measures—need to be considered. Future research on the topic, with plans that overcome these limitations, will offer much to our understanding.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Criminal Justice Student's Perception of Law Enforcement

1. How old are you? _____ (Must be 18 or older to do survey)
2. What is the gender that you identify as?
 - 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/descent?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. What is 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
 - d. Other (please specify) _____
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 law enforcement or a related field (e.g., corrections)?

- a. No
- b. Yes

11. Do you have any immediate family members who are or have previously been employed in law enforcement or a related field (e.g., corrections)?

- a. No
- b. Yes

12. In the last 12 months, approximately how many times have you had direct contact with an on-duty police officer?

Please specify:

13. If you have had direct contact with an on-duty police officer in the last 12 months, approximately what percentage of those contacts were initiated by you (i.e., you called the police)?

Please specify:

The following section asks about how often you consume *NOTE* 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.

Type of Media	Never 1	2	Sometimes 3	4	All the time 5
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courtier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times-News, etc.)					
Magazines					
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)					
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)					
Television Dramas (The Shield, CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)					
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911!, etc.)					
Reality Shows (e.g., Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)					
Documentary Shows (e.g. 48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)					
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)					
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)					
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)					

Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)					
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)					

The next set of questions ask how realistic *NOTE* Please indicate your level of confidence in your ability from (1) Not confident at all to (5) Very confident.

Types of Media	Not Realistic at all 1	2	Somewhat Realistic 3	4	Highly Realistic 5
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courtier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times-News, etc.)					
Magazines					
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)					
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)					
Television Dramas (The Shield, CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)					
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911!, etc.)					
Reality Shows (e.g., Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)					

Documentary Shows (e.g. 48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)					
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)					
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)					
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)					
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)					
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)					

The following items will ask you whether you have positive or negative perceptions *NOTE*. Please indicate how important each of the following is in your decision, ranging from (1) Not important at all to (5) Very important.

Types of Media	Highly Negative 1	2	Neutral 3	4	Highly Positive 5
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courtier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times-News, etc.)					
Magazines					
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)					
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)					

Television Dramas (The Shield, CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)					
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911!, etc.)					
Reality Shows (e.g., Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)					
Documentary Shows (e.g. 48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)					
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)					
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)					
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)					
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)					
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)					

The following items relate to how media influence your perceptions to police. *NOTE* Please indicate how you perceive each on a scale from highly negative (1) to highly positive (5).

Types of Media	Strongly Disagree 1	2	Neutral 3	4	Strongly Agree 5
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Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courtier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times-News, etc.)					
Magazines					
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)					
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)					
Television Dramas (The Shield, CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)					
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911!, etc.)					
Reality Shows (e.g., Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)					
Documentary Shows (e.g. 48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)					
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)					
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)					
Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)					
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)					
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)					

Please indicate how big of a role plays into your interest in Criminal Justice *NOTE*

Types of Media	Strongly Disagree 1	2	Neutral 3	4	Strongly Agree 5
Newspapers (Bristol Herald Courtier, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times-News, etc.)					
Magazines					
Local News (WCYB, WJHL, etc.)					
National News (Fox, CNN, ABC, NBC, etc.)					
Television Dramas (The Shield, CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, etc.)					
Television Comedy (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Psycho, Reno 911!, etc.)					
Reality Shows (e.g., Cops, Southern Justice, Live PD, etc.)					
Documentary Shows (e.g. 48 Hours, To Catch A Predator, etc.)					
Drama Movies (Silence of the Lambs, Training Day, The Departed, etc.)					
Action Movies (Die Hard, The French Connection, Dirty Harry, etc.)					

Comedy Movies (Rush Hour, 21 Jump Street, Knives Out, etc.)					
Documentary (The Thin Blue Line, Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, etc.)					
Podcasts (Crime Junkie, Casefile, etc.)					

[ODL1]Would need to come up with probably 5 or so more items for this section.