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COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF POLICING CAREERS

BY

PATRICK SULLIVAN

Bachelor of Arts, University of New Hampshire, 2018

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Justice Studies

December, 2018

This thesis was examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Justice Studies by:

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On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018

Approval signatures are on file with the University of New Hampshire Graduate School.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have provided me with endless support throughout my academic career. I would not have been able to reach this point without your continued support and encouragement in my time at UNH. I would also like to dedicate this to Ambré Laprise, who has provided me with unconditional support throughout this thesis. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without her constant reassurances and positivity.

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## ABSTRACT

### COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE AND POLICING CAREERS

by

Patrick Sullivan

University of New Hampshire

Police departments across the United States have had tremendous difficulties in recruiting new officers over recent years. Past research has examined factors that motivate people to become police officers but has not examined reasons why people choose not to become police officers. This study aims to identify the college students' opinions of policing careers. This study evaluates the relationship of views, past interactions, thoughts of prestige, and the role of the media in students' desire to enter a policing career through a survey and follow-up interviews. Survey results show no statistically significant relationship between views of police and past interactions with police and the desire to become a police officer but a statistically significant relationship between the perceived prestige of the profession and desire to become a police officer. Interview data also suggests that the media influence police career choice among college students in various ways.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the United States, media attention has been focused on policing after recent events in Ferguson, Baltimore, and other cities and towns across the country relating the treatment of citizens by police. It has been shown that citizens' levels of confidence in the police are strongly correlated to their levels of trust in government and the courts (Boateng, Lee & Abess, 2016). Knowing this, it is easy to see why those who find the court decisions unjust in instances such as Ferguson also have limited approval of the police. Additionally, children are highly likely to have similar views of policing to their parents (Sindall, McCarthy, & Brunton-Smith, 2017). Thus, if most parents do not view police favorably youth will develop negative opinions of the police. Parental support and encouragement is strongly connected to a child's career aspirations (Leung, Wright, & Foster, 1987). Parents help their child in guiding them toward their future and have influence in what they careers they choose to pursue – or not to pursue – in their futures.

This brings about the current problem of policing and police recruitment. Law enforcement today is faced with the challenge of training a new generation of officers in a society that continues to grow more critical of the profession. Currently, police departments across the United States are facing widespread recruitment issues and are having difficulties finding qualified candidates (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, & Grammich, 2010). With agencies having trouble finding new officers and retaining current officers, departments are becoming more understaffed. Approximately 20% of law enforcement agencies are operating at 90% capacity or less with 3% of those agencies are operating at 80% capacity or less (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). The lack of qualified applicants in the field of policing is concerning because of the consequences that this will play in public safety and in the quality of officers nationally. As this

crisis continues to unfold, research is needed to examine potential contributors to this downward trend of police applicants. The purpose of this thesis is to identify why people are or are not interested in a career in policing and to address gaps in the literature on this topic.

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview of Police Employment in the United States**

Law enforcement is a major industry of jobs in the United States today. Over 1 million people today are employed by law enforcement agencies nationally. State and local police agencies employ approximately 730,000 sworn officers (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). These positions are supplemented by an additional 345,000 civilian positions (ibid). Over the past few decades, employment in policing in the United States has grown from 569,703 full time sworn officers in 1992 to 750,340 officers in 2012 (Banks, Hendrix, Hickman, & Kyckelhahn, 2016). This growth in police jobs is expected to continue with police and detective jobs in the United States predicted to grow by about 4% annually in future years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This demonstrates that the field of policing is following its historic trend of growth over the last twenty-five years and that job opportunities in the field will continue to increase. This is particularly important for this research because since jobs in the field of policing are growing, this would predict that the number of vacancies across the country would also increase.

### **Recruitment Problems in Law Enforcement**

While the number of jobs in policing has risen over the years, the recruitment of new police officers has become a big issue for police agencies today across the United States. For law enforcement agencies, the goal of recruitment is to attract the best candidates for the position of police officer (White & Escobar, 2008). Law enforcement agencies are tasked with finding the most qualified individuals to fill vacant roles in police work. From 1992 to 2008, the number of sworn state and local law enforcement positions increased by 141,000 or 25% (U. S. Department of Justice, 2012). A 1.6% annual growth rate for state and local officers is predicted, surpassing

the growth rate of the US population of 1.2% (U. S. Department of Justice, 2012). While the law enforcement job growth in the field of law enforcement is steadily increasing, the number of applications for vacant police officer positions is decreasing nationally (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). This issue has also received attention from the federal government. In recent years, over \$1 billion was appropriated to the federal U.S. Department of Justice in order to help fill vacancies in law enforcement positions (Wilson et al., 2010). Law enforcement agencies overwhelmingly responded to this program with over 7,000 agency applications requesting over \$8 billion for police recruitment (Wilson et al., 2010). The large quantity of applications and requests for additional funding for recruitment amongst law enforcement agencies demonstrates how extreme this issue is on a national level.

Countless departments in the United States are operating with vacancies that they are unable to fill. In California, over 15,000 vacancies were reported throughout the state in law enforcement positions (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). These shortages spanned over 600 state and local agencies (ibid). Even smaller states such as Maine have had difficulties recruiting candidates and filling vacancies. Maine State Police have 28 vacancies that have gone unfilled, after just 8 troopers graduated from their most recent academy (Leary, 2016). The Virginia State Police also face an immense recruitment problem in their police force. Their police force is short 237 officers, equating to 11% of its trooper positions as being unfilled (Breitenbach, 2016). Even in New York City, the NYPD missed its recruitment goal by 2,000 officers, with the NYPD commissioner Ray Kelly calling the recruitment gap “a crisis” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Furthermore, 65 out of 300 officer positions remained in Macon, Georgia as their police department struggled to recruit new officers (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009).

This has been an issue in the southern United States in cities such as Houston and New Orleans. There are a total of 5,389 sworn officer positions in the Houston Police Department. Throughout the years, there has been a drastically significant rise in the number of vacancies in their police department. Vacancies have risen from 51 unfilled positions in 2004 to 605 unfilled positions in 2006 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Even though they had over 600 vacancies in 2006, their 2006 police academy only consisted of 236 members, leaving hundreds of positions unfilled (ibid). Following Hurricane Katrina, a time where the need for public safety personnel was at its highest, the New Orleans Police Department struggled immensely to fill its vacancies. From 2005 to 2006, the New Orleans Police Department had 321 vacancies that went unfilled and remained vacant (Rostker, Hix, & Wilson, 2007). In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Department was not able to recruit a single new officer from August 2005 to January 2006 (Rostker et al., 2007). With officers leaving the force due to injuries and retirements, the inability to recruit new officers continues to lead to more vacancies.

San Jose is another police department that has experienced difficulty in the recruiting process, leading to longer working hours for its officers. Vacancies for sworn positions in the department have increased from 22 positions in 2008 to 218 vacancies in 2015 (City of San Jose, 2016). This represented an increase in vacancies from 2% to 20% over a period of just seven years. This issue has affected the department's ability to serve the community as well, as over 200 patrol shifts in the city are vacant each month that must be filled in order to reach the minimum desired staffing levels of the department (City of San Jose, 2016). This has resulted in the department filling its vacancies with mandatory overtime, totaling over 410,000 hour of overtime worked by San Jose officers in 2015 (City of San Jose, 2016). For the average officer, this results in a 100% increase in overtime hours worked from 2008 to 2015, as the average

number of overtime hours worked went from 225 hours to 450 hours of overtime annually per officer (City of San Jose, 2016). Even with all of this overtime worked by officers, the department still has not been able to fill all of its vacant shifts, leaving some shifts unfilled (City of San Jose, 2016).

These issues in recruitment affect law enforcement agencies on the state level as well. For example, the state of Georgia does not have enough troopers to patrol the roads of the state for 24 hours per day (Cook, 2016). Out of 953 positions in the department, 164 of those positions were vacant and unable to be filled (Cooks, 2016). This leaves the department with a 17.2% vacancy level. In a section of Georgia that spans twenty counties, there is only one trooper out on patrol every night after midnight, leaving most territory uncovered by law enforcement for a period of time (Cooks, 2016). In other parts of the state, troopers are on call overnight and respond from home to accidents and incidents occurring past midnight (Cooks, 2016). This affects troopers' ability to respond to calls for service, as Georgia State Troopers were unable to respond to 2,400 reported accidents in 2015 (Cooks, 2016).

### **Current Policies and Practices in Police Recruitment**

While little research has been done to discover the origins of this problem over recent years, previous methods of police recruiting may be outdated or ineffective. A majority of officers feel that it is more difficult to recruit new officers than it was five years ago due to the growing and changing role of police in society (Wilson et al., 2010). Police departments have largely become the gateway to social services in their communities, creating additional responsibilities for officers (ibid). Across the country, some police departments have centralized their application process through their human resources departments in their communities. Other police agencies rely on civil service boards to provide lists of eligible personnel to be hired.

These hiring processes tend to be difficult and drawn out and are often times frustrating and discouraging to those considering applying for police positions (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). This leads to a distancing for departments from the hiring process, which can make selecting quality candidates that will remain with the department long-term more difficult. This had led to some departments moving away from this model of recruitment and hiring in order to make the process more individualized to their specific department.

### **Retention Problems in Law Enforcement**

In thinking about police recruitment, it is also important to look at the retention and attrition of law enforcement officers. The issue of police recruitment does not stop at just hiring new officers but in fact expands to retention of officers already on the force. Retention problems in law enforcement have created more vacancies in police departments that need to be filled by recruiting new officers. There is extensive existing literature about the retention problems in law enforcement and why people leave policing jobs. While hiring 61,000 officers in 2008, U.S. police agencies lost 51,000 officers due to retirements, resignations, or other types of separation from policing. More than half of the officers lost were due to resignations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). After Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department lost 160 officers between August 2005 and January 2006, an average of 40 officers per month (Rostker et al., 2007). While recruiting 33 new officers from January to October 2006 New Orleans lost another 185 officers, leaving even more vacancies in the department (Rostker et al., 2007).

Turnover has become a common occurrence in police departments throughout the United States. In Florida, 20% of municipal police officers left their jobs within their first 18 months of working and gaining employment (Orrick, 2007). Alaska has shown turnover rates as high as 35% (Orrick, 2007). This problem even persists in smaller states like Vermont, where the state is



plagued by a turnover rate of roughly 9% in law enforcement positions (Orrick, 2007). This is a huge issue for police departments nationwide as vacancies are being created shortly after they are originally filled. This turnover of police officers puts police departments in a position where they are less experienced as they have fewer officers with long tenures on the force. Additionally, this creates a high cost for the taxpayer, as states and municipalities have to foot the bill for the training of new police officers, some of which only stay on the force for a year or two. Twenty-five percent of police officers in many states across the United States leave their positions within the first three years on the job (Orrick, 2007). This puts an immense amount of strain on police agencies as they not only have to worry about recruiting new officers but also now have to work to keep the officers they already have. Police departments that have higher rates of turnover and a less experienced police force are shown to be less productive and deliver a lower quality of service to their communities, further supporting that attrition in law enforcement is having a detrimental impact on communities (Orrick, 2007). Thus, if looking at how a majority of these vacancies started in the first place is an important step in seeing how the problem can be fixed.

The existing literature about the retention problems in law enforcement and why people leave policing jobs points to salary as a leading reason for why officers leave the profession. Attrition amongst current police officers is a growing problem that law enforcement agencies are seeing. This attrition is partially due to broadening police responsibilities such as expanding programs and initiatives through community policing methods and techniques (Wilson et al., 2010). According to law enforcement professionals and administrators, salary is the most common reason why officers leave the field (Orrick, 2007). In New York City, the starting base pay for police officers is only \$35,681, which can leave a lot to be desired for officers on the job (Wilson & Grammich, 2009). Additionally, many officers have been called to serve on active

duty through the armed forces or have chosen to pursue security work in the private industry for higher wages (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). While the salary of police officers varies by town and state, low pay for police officers appears to be a significant reason for why people exit the job and could also be a reason why people do not enter the policing field to begin with.

The retirement of current police officers is another reason why police departments are seeing issues in retention throughout their agencies. Current officers, many of whom grew up in the age of baby boomers, are now reaching the age for retirement and this has created a large amount of long-term police officers exiting the force (Orrick, 2007). In the Arlington County Police Department in Virginia, 50 of the department's 366 officers are eligible for retirement, which shows the potential for even more future vacancies in the force (Wilson & Grammich, 2009). With more and more officers reaching retirement age, there is more and more of a need for more recruits to enter the ranks and fill these newly created vacancies.

Job satisfaction amongst police officers provides another major reason why police officers are leaving the force. Orrick (2007) suggests that police departments have not adapted to the demands of a better-educated workforce by providing challenging working environments and problem solving opportunities, causing officers to leave the job in search of other work. If these needs of officers are not met, then these officers who may be highly qualified for their positions, leave police departments in search of other employment that can fulfill these needs. Other officers have left the job due to how difficult they feel it is for them to balance work and life responsibilities (McCarty & Skogan, 2012). In a study of both officers and civilian police employees across the United States, McCarty & Skogan (2012) found that officers did not feel as if they were receiving needed support from coworkers and that they could never get away from the job, even during times that they were off duty. Other studies have similarly concluded that

officers often feel overcommitted at work and even when off duty feel that they cannot withdraw from their working life (Violanti, Mnatsakanova, Andrew, Allison, Gu, & Fekedulegn, 2018). Officers have also dropped out of police work because they felt as if the job did not match their expectations that they had when they entered the profession. In a study of why recruits voluntarily resigned from their police department within their first 16 months of employment, the most common reason pertained to the recruits' beliefs and expectations of police work conflicting with the actual practices and reality of policing (Haarr, 2005). There has also been an increased amount of scrutiny and criticism placed on police departments in recent years, adding to the stress and strain within police departments and their organizational culture (Brough, Chataway, & Biggs, 2016). New technology such as body cameras that have emerged in the field of policing over the past decade have led to an increase in officer burnout as well, due to the officers having a perceiving less organizational support from their departments (Adams & Mastracci, 2018). Whether it be misperceptions about the realities of police work or beliefs that their departments are less supportive of officers, officers are leaving police work for a multitude of reasons related to their job satisfaction and creating more vacancies for departments to fill.

### **The Dangers of an Understaffed Police Force**

As stated above, police departments are continually understaffed and are working at less than their full capacity. This is a cause for concern due to the increased workload that is put on officers of a department when vacant shifts and positions exist. If agencies are not operating with enough officers, this requires other fulltime officers to work extra overtime hours during the week. These officers are working longer hours and are spending increasing amounts of time at work. In some communities, officers have worked in excess of 100 hours per week due to open shifts needing to be filled. In a recent survey of fifteen different police agencies, 100% of police

officers worked at least sixty hours per week over the past month with an average of sixty-six hours worked per week (Senjo, 2011). Officers that work more overtime and overnight shifts receive lower amount of sleep at night. Furthermore, officers that suffer from lack of sleep and increased overtime are at an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Violanti et al., 2009). Consequentially, these higher workloads are putting officers' health and safety at risk. Excessive work schedules and reduced sleep for officers have proven to reduce officer safety, compromise public safety, and lead to avoidable accidents (Senjo, 2011). Even moderate levels of sleep deprivation have been shown to have extreme impacts on cognitive and motor of performance that are similar to those associated with alcohol intoxication (Williamson & Feyer, 2000).

### **Why People Become Police Officers**

In examining the issue of recruitment issues in police departments throughout the country, it is important to examine the reasons why people choose to become police officers. There has been past literature that has explored motivating factors amongst police cadets and police officers for why they originally entered the profession. By looking at the literature on why people decide to become police officers, this thesis can see if differences exist between past studies and the sample student population as well as see if additional factors exist that may limit students' desire to become a police officer.

There are numerous studies that have examined different reasons why people become police officers. Some studies have concluded that the perceived prestige of policing is a major factor that leads people to pursue a policing career (Lester, 1983; Foley, Guarmeri, & Kelly, 2007). A study of police cadets in South Korea concluded that the four main factors to entering policing that cadets cited were influence from others, job security and steady salary, authority and law enforcement, and the adventure and excitement that comes with police work (Moon &

Hwang, 2004). Other studies have suggested that fighting crime, companionship with co-workers, helping others, job security, and enforcing laws were the biggest reasons that police officers entered the profession (Lester, 1983). Police recruits have cited the opportunity to help others, job benefits, and job security as their main reasons for becoming police officers (Raganella & White, 2004). In other cases, the reason for entering policing has differed by race and by gender, with both female and minority police officers citing that opportunities for advancement are highly significant factors for them choosing to enter the field more than white males cited this as a reason to choose the field (Foley et al., 2007). Meanwhile, others have found there to be a strong influence by those who have family in the profession to enter the field (Moon & Hwang, 2004).

A major reason cited for people entering the field of policing pertains to their belief that policing itself is a prestigious career. Respondents in Lester's (1983) study viewed the prestige of policing as a profession as a main factor to their choice of policing as a career (Lester, 1983). This was important in demonstrating that people who choose to enter policing as a profession do so because they believe that the profession is noble and highly coveted and looked well upon by others. Foley, Guarneri, & Kelly (2007) concluded that even two decades after Lester's study, the main reasons that people decide to enter policing as a profession have remained mostly the same over time. Respondents in this study continued to view policing as prestigious, and this prestige was a significant attractor toward choosing policing as a career (Foley et al., 2007).

Differences between race and gender have also been found in studies examining the reasons why people become police officers. In Lester's (1983) initial study, whites rated having friends or family in the profession as being an important factor to choosing policing as a career while this characteristic was not significant for other races. In other words, those with relatives in

policing were more likely to be influenced to enter policing by their relatives compared to those who did not have family that were police. This aligns with other research that has concluded that having family members in a law enforcement position can influence a person to select a law enforcement career (Schlosser, Safran, & Sbaratta, 2010). In contrast, some research has shown that racial and ethnic minorities rank opportunities for advancement as more significant to them choosing policing as a career than whites (Foley et al., 2007). Additionally, minorities cited having the ability to work alone with autonomy as a more significant factor that interested them in policing than whites (Foley et al., 2007). However, other studies have concluded that there were not race or gender differences in the reasons that people chose to become police officers, and all races had the same motivations for entering the profession (Raganella & White, 2004). Overall this literature does suggest that race is a variable worth examining further with modern day issues with police recruitment.

Significant gender differences were also found in determining reasons why people enter policing. Females were more likely than their male counterparts to place greater importance on opportunities for advancement and less likely to be strongly influenced by friends or relatives that were police officers (Foley et al., 2007). Males were found to be less likely to be motivated toward policing by influence from significant others, job security and salary, and the adventure and excitement of the job compared to females (Moon & Hwang, 2004). However, there were no significant differences by gender in citing job security and steady salary as reasons for entering policing, as both viewed this as their top reason for entering the profession (Moon & Hwang, 2004). Foley et al. (2007) also suggest that future research should focus on why individuals likely to enter policing (such as criminal justice majors) choose not to enter the field of policing, which is one of the focus points of this current study. Despite there being a limited amount of

research on why people enter policing, differences by gender and may be an important to consider when examining the issue of police recruitment today.

Other studies have shown various other job characteristics about policing as motivating factors for people to enter the profession. Job security was noted as being the most important of factors amongst South Korean recruits in contributing to why cadets decided to enter policing (Moon & Hwang, 2004). Other studies found that over time job security became more important in recruits' reasons for entering policing (Foley et al., 2007). This may suggest that policing is seen as a stable profession that is not in danger of losing positions easily. Other studies have suggested that those of lower socioeconomic statuses may enter law enforcement in order to be more upwardly mobile (Schlosser et al., 2010). This again follows the theme that job security is important to those who enter policing and those who enter policing view the field as being stable and being able to provide them with job security. While some studies found salary to be a contributing factor to those choosing to enter policing (Moon & Hwang, 2004), others found that it was not a significant factor at all (Raganella & White, 2004). Additionally, recruits placed a greater emphasis on the military-like structure of police departments in more recent years (Foley et al., 2007). There have been additional studies examining police recruits and their reasons for entering policing as well, including one that focused on recruits for the New York City Police Department (Ragnella & White, 2004). Additionally, entering policing because it was a lifelong dream or aspiration was another motivating factor among respondents, suggesting that the desire to become a police officer may begin at a much earlier age (Raganella & White, 2004). In this case, lack of other career alternatives, military structure, and the power and authority of policing were not influential factors to why people entered policing between both males and females (Raganella & White, 2004). These additional variables of job security, salary, lifelong aspirations,

and the military-like structure of policing should also be taken into account in this thesis when examining motivations for choosing whether or not to enter policing. This thesis incorporates these job characteristics into the survey measurement in order to help determine if they are significant factors in students' choice of whether or not to enter policing.

### **Public Perceptions of the Police**

People's decisions to become police officers may be shaped by their views of police officers themselves. If individuals do not have generally positive views of the police, then one may suggest that they may be less likely to aspire to join that profession. This idea of the relation between views of the police and its relationship to students' desire to enter policing is one of the focal points of this research study as past literature into public perceptions of the police has not concentrated on this area. If a relationship between students' views of the police and their desire to become a police officer were to exist then it would be able to at least partially answer the research question of why students choose whether or not to become a police officer.

In investigating perceptions of the police, the literature highlights public opinion, as well as how individual perceptions are influenced by interactions with police. Public opinion polls largely find that the American public holds favorable views of the police. Pew Research Center is one organization that has recently taken a look at Americans' views toward police officers. In a September 2017 poll, 64% of Americans viewed police officers warmly and favorably compared to 18% who viewed them coldly or unfavorably (Fingerhut, 2017). These views toward police officers differed considerably based on the race of the respondent and the political affiliation of the respondent. Blacks, Hispanics, and Democrats all had much more mixed views and perceptions of the police than whites and those who identified as Republican (Fingerhut, 2017). Other research by Pew Research Center has supported the notion that minorities have less



favorable views toward the police with only about 33% of blacks believing the police do a good job in their communities and use appropriate force, compared to 75% of whites (Morin & Stepler, 2016). This helps to highlight that racial differences in views of police are an important factor today and appear to be a contributing factor toward people's views of the police.

Furthermore, there appears to be differences of opinion between the police and the public in terms of what the perceived needs of the police are. According to a 2016 Pew Research Poll, while 65% of the public says that there should either be no change in police force size or smaller forces, 86% of police officers say that more police are needed (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017). Additionally, while 83% of the public believed that they understood the risks and challenges that police officers faced while 86% of police officers believed that the public did not understand the challenges that they face on the job (ibid). There are also sharp differences between the police and the public when it comes to incidences of police brutality. Sixty-seven percent of police officers believe that these encounters are isolated incidents while 60% of the public believes that these incidents are signs of a broader problem in policing (ibid). There appear to be drastic differences between the police and the public's interpretation of current-day policing, which can be problematic for police-public relations. This is important for this thesis because the relationship between the public and the police could be an indicator of students' level of interest in policing careers. Consequently, it is possible that public misperceptions regarding the police or vice versa could result in a lessened interest amongst students to pursue a policing career.

Prior research has also examined public confidence in the police. As people become more confident in the ability of the police to do their jobs well, they become less concerned about crime occurring in their neighborhoods (Skogan, 2009). To examine factors that make the public

more confident in police, Sunshine and Tyler (2003) found that seeing the police as both legitimate and fair in the community had the highest relationship with people having positive views toward the police. If people believe that the police will actively fight crime and that they will be fair throughout the process of finding justice, then they will view the police more favorably. This is important in determining college students' interest in policing careers as students' perceptions of police fairness and procedural justice by police officers could be an important variable in their choice of whether or not to become a police officer.

### **Public Views and Interactions with Police**

There has been a recent push amongst scholars for police departments to move toward models of procedural justice in order to maintain positive relations with the community. Citizens that perceive procedurally just treatment have been shown to have higher perceptions of police legitimacy (Nagin & Telep, 2017). Research has shown that even for police departments that may be facing a shortage of funds, switching to a policing style of procedural justice does not incur any highly significant costs compared to other policing styles (Hough, 2012). This suggests that police departments can engage in policing practices and methods that lead to more public approval of the police without incurring higher logistical and administrative costs.

This is important in relation to this thesis as it provides a theoretical background of how people form their opinions toward police officers. This is important in determining how to measure students' views of police officers. Including students' perceptions police fairness is an important aspect of measuring students' views of police officers. This research study can use students' views of police officers to compare with students' level of desire to enter a policing career. This will better help to understand factors that influence students to become or not become a police officer.

Other research has focused on the public's perceptions of police officers during their interactions with police. It has been shown that experiences with crime and the police are more important than seeing police in the media in shaping one's views toward the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). Research has found that overall the public is generally trustworthy of the police and believes that they exhibit procedural justice, without having outside motives in administering their duties (Bates, Antrobus, Bennett, & Martin, 2015). In a study examining interactions between police and citizens during random breath tests, researchers found that people are also more willing to cooperate with police officers than police officers perceived them to be (Bates et al., 2015). This suggests that there may be a disconnect in some instances between the public's view of a police encounter and an officer's view of that same encounter. This being said, the public generally has favorable views of their police interactions over negative views of police interactions.

Research has also found that there are direct consequences to having negative encounters with police that can severely lessen people's views of the police. Skogan (2007) studied events of police encounters with citizens in the city of Chicago. Throughout his research he looked at the interactions of police and citizens and labeled interactions as being positive or negative experiences in the views of the citizens interacting with the police. In conclusion of his study, he found that the effects of positive and negative experiences with police differed immensely (Skogan, 2007). Skogan (2007) found that having a negative police encounter had four to fourteen times the impact that having a positive police encounter has on citizens' views of police. Poor contacts with police are associated with poorer opinions regarding police effectiveness, police fairness, and police community engagement. (Bradford, Jackson, and Stanko, 2007). On the contrary, Skogan (2007) found that in many cases, having a positive experience with police

did not affect their views toward police (positive interactions with police were not significant with changed views toward the police) while negative experiences with police severely damaged people's views of police. Other studies have differed with this notion that positive interactions with police did not have any significance with more favorable views of police. Bradford et al. (2007) assert that positive interactions with police can lead to an increased perception and notion of fairness and engagement within the community. This suggests that positive police interactions with the community may in fact be beneficial to police and may serve to build trust with the public.

As with views toward police officer, it is also possible that students' past interactions with police officers impact their desire to become a police officer. Students with less favorable interactions with police officers may be less likely to choose to want to become a police officer and vice versa. By determining students' perceptions on the quality of their past encounters with police officers, this research study will be able to fill this gap in the literature by examining if a relationship exists between past interactions with police officers and a subsequent desire, or lack thereof, to become a police officer.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

There has been some past research addressing best practices for police departments, reasons that police enter the profession, and trends indicating a high attrition rate for police officers and reasons why they are leaving. However, this literature is limited in several different ways. One limitation of this past literature is that there is no indication to how many police officers is an adequate number of police officers for departments perusing to protect and serve their communities. There have been no numerical indicators for departments in order to establish

a rationale behind previously set minimum staffing levels. While future research should examine this, this is not an area that this study looks to expand upon.

One area that this study does look to expand upon the current literature is in terms of establishing a rationale behind why people choose not to enter the profession of policing. Past research has focused extensively on why police officers become police officers, suggesting that they do so in order to serve and help others around them in the community and because they believed policing to be prestigious (Lester, 1983). However, this research neglects to focus on reasons why people elect not to become police officers and pursue law enforcement careers. Past studies have also neglected to focus on college students as their population of study for those interested in entering policing. Past studies have primarily focused on those already signed up as police officers in training academies and have not focused on those who are interested in the profession but have not yet acquired employment in policing or law enforcement. More specifically, research has neglected to focus on why those involved in collegiate degree programs well-suited for policing such as criminal justice, sociology, and psychology elect not to pursue jobs as police officers.

This research study aims to address these gaps in the literature by examining reasons why college students are and are not interested in policing as a career. This study asks five key questions regarding students and police: First, this study asks whether a relationship exists between students' views of the police and their desire to become a police officer. Second, this study asks if a relationship exists between students' past police interactions and their desire to become a police officer. Third, this study examines the effect that past media coverage of the police has had on students' desire to become a police officer. Fourth, this study examines the relationship between students' perceptions of policing as a prestigious career and their

subsequent desire to become a police officer. Fifth, this study aims to determine what factors and characteristics draw students to want to become police officers as well as the factors and characteristics that deter students from wanting to become police officers.

### **Current Study**

While there is a substantial amount of current literature documenting issues of police recruitment, officer retention, and regarding vacancies within police departments, research has not focused on determining why this has occurred. For this thesis, I assess why college students are choosing not to pursue a career in policing. Specifically, I aim to determine what job characteristics and factors that students find important in a career and how they feel that policing careers relate to these desirable employment characteristics. Past literature has researched the factors that motivate people to become police officers and enter the profession of policing. However, research has not been conducted in order to examine why people choose not to enter the profession. The purpose of this study is to begin the process of examining this ongoing problem by identifying potential reasons that college students choose not to pursue careers in policing.

Throughout this thesis project, I am guided by multiple related research questions. First, I ask what specific job factors and characteristics are appealing to college students when they think about a career. This question aims to identify specifics such as pay, early retirement, and fulfillment of the work, which are important to students choosing their future careers. I also look at less important factors, such as whether having friends or family in a profession influences students' career choice. Second, I examine students' perceptions of police and their perceptions of a policing career. I examine students' attitudes toward police and the profession in order to determine if these attitudes influence their desire to enter policing as a career. I also examine

students' perceptions of policing careers as a whole and whether students feel that a policing career is a valuable and prestigious career to pursue. Overall, I address what specifically attracts students to policing careers or disinterests them from these careers.

There are numerous benefits to this study in terms of its practical applications to hiring agencies and its significance to academia. This study is one of the first to examine reasons that college students are deciding not to enter policing, which adds scholarship to the field of police recruitment by filling a current void in the literature. Additionally, this study can be used to assist present-day police departments and law enforcement agencies as they continue searching for new recruits to fill their ranks. Understanding common themes as to why people are not interested in policing can help agencies to better recruit people by tailoring their message to people that may be interested in law enforcement. Additionally, identifying themes as to why people are interested in policing can help police departments to better market themselves to candidates with these attractive features.

## **Methods**

My research study sought to investigate interest in policing as a career. I measured interest in policing as a career – while accounting for factors that may impact this – using an anonymous, online survey of students at a large, four-year public university. Students were used in this study because they are on the cusp of making career decisions as they enter the workforce. To delve deeper into their responses regarding interest or lack of interest in policing, I conducted follow-up interviews with willing students.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were students at a large New England University of at least 18 years of age. All students enrolled at the university were eligible to take part in this study. College students were the desired population for this study because they are young adults who are currently identifying their future career aspirations. I used measurements for perceptions of policing as a career, perceptions of police, perceptions of procedural justice in policing, and interactions with police. I measured these different perceptions of policing and policing careers via an anonymous online Qualtrics survey.

### **Survey Recruitment**

I used a number of methods to recruit students to take the online survey. I asked faculty from the University of New Hampshire to help recruit students to take part in the study. I asked faculty to share this study with their students during the spring 2018 semester. I specifically targeted faculty from the social science disciplines of justice studies, sociology, and psychology because these disciplines most closely relate to the field of policing. Some faculty chose to offer participation in this study for course credit while others elected to simply publicize the study to their students. Additionally, I put up posters and fliers around campus and inside of academic



buildings in order to recruit participants. These fliers were also posted on Facebook in order to attract students to participate. Fliers detailed the study as well as how students could participate anonymously in the online survey administered using the online survey platform Qualtrics.

### **Survey Instrument**

The purpose of this survey was to gauge participants' perceptions of police officers and participants' perceptions of careers in policing. A total of 587 participants completed the online survey and were counted in the quantitative data. Responses that were listed on Qualtrics as being less than 80% complete were not counted during the quantitative data, were deleted from Qualtrics, and thus were omitted from the analyses. This was done in order to ensure that those counted in the survey had at least partially completed the final sections of the survey regarding views and interactions with police. Age of participants was calculated by using their birth month and year at the time that the survey began, January 2018. The mean and median age of participants in the survey were 20 years old and the mode was 18 years old.

The survey consisted of 50 questions designed to assess factors influencing one's decision to enter policing. The survey was administered on Qualtrics, an online survey program that allows researchers to provide anonymity to their participants. Participants took on average 10-15 minutes to complete the survey based on Qualtrics data.

### **Survey Measures**

To account for demographic factors that potentially influence survey response, the first component of the survey measures basic demographics such as gender, race, ethnicity, personal and family annual income, and age. Basic and standard demographic questions were used in the survey to assess these factors. Past research has shown that demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender can both have a significant impact on decisions to enter policing (Foley et

al., 2007; Moon & Hwang, 2004). Demographic information was also obtained to capture a profile of participants for statistical purposes. Females were coded as “0” and males were coded as “1” and transformed into the variable titled “Male”. Other genders were omitted from analyses, as there were too few participants from other genders. Additionally, class standing and college majors and minors were collected in order to understand students’ academic backgrounds. At this university, the Justice Studies major/minor are commonly associated with students interested in legal professions such as policing. Not being interested in a Justice Studies major or minor was coded as “0”. Those who were currently Justice Studies majors or minors or were interested in being a Justice Studies major or minor was coded as “1”. See Table 1:

*Descriptive Statistics of Survey Data* for more information.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Survey Data*

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	148	25.2%
Female	429	73.6%
<b>Race</b>		
White	549	91.96%
Non-White	45	7.54%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Non-Hispanic	529	93.3%
Hispanic	26	4.59 %
<b>Class Standing</b>		
Freshman	189	32.4%
Sophomore	121	20.7%
Junior	100	17.1%
Senior	160	27.3%
Other	14	2.4%
<b>Justice Studies</b>		
Yes	284	49.2%
No	294	50.9%

To measure interest in careers, the second component of the survey investigates students' career plans. Participants were asked about their future career plans in order to measure their interest in policing. Participants were asked how confident they were in their future career plans. The survey then examined characteristics that students viewed as desirable for future careers. These scales were calculated based on prior research aimed at determining why people become police officers with a pre-existing set of factors (Lester, 1983). Central to this study, the second component of the survey highlighted student interest in policing as a career. Participants were asked how interested they were in law enforcement. Participants were given 4 options to indicate their level of interest: Very interested, interested, not very interested, and not interested. See Table 2: *Interest in Law Enforcement*.

Table 2

*Interest in Law Enforcement?*

Interest Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Interested	69	11.8%
Interested	158	27.1%
Not Very Interested	209	35.8%
Not Interested	147	25.2%

Responses were later collapsed into “interest in policing” (scored “1”) and “not interested in policing” (scored “0”), which was used as the dependent/outcome variable in a logistic regression measuring factors that influence interest in policing as a career.

Participants who selected that they were very interested, interested, or not very interested in law enforcement received follow-up questions in the survey about their interest. They were asked about their level of interest in local, state, or federal police or corrections in order to differentiate what level of law enforcement participants were interested in. They were also asked

to select how important they believed certain job characteristics were to why people commonly became police officers based off of the same scale that Lester (1983) used in his study.

The third component of the survey measured participants' views of police officers. Participants were asked about their views toward police officers via a series of eleven 5-point likert scale questions organized in matrix form. Questions from a pre-existing survey documenting views of the legal system and their actors, specifically accounting for legal consciousness and procedural justice (Abbott, Barak, & Kocher, 2018), were modified to fit the purpose of this study. The responses to these questions were later summed into an index variable that categorized participants' views of police on an 11-55 scale, with higher scores indicating more positive views of the police. A complete list of each specific question contributing to the index variable for views of policing is available in appendix one.

Alongside these questions, and of particular interest to this study, participants were asked about their views of the policing profession. Lester (1983) indicated that those who enter policing often do so because they consider it a prestigious profession. Thus, participants were asked a 5-point likert scale question regarding if they believed policing to be a prestigious career. This question was left as a stand-alone question and was not incorporated into the index variable of views.

To account for the possibility that other factors may influence students' views of policing as a career, additional questions were asked. To account for the possibility that students' personal relationships may impact their views, participants were asked if they knew a police officer on a personal level and, if so, how so. Respondents were also asked what they perceived the annual income level of a police officer to be. This allowed me to account for the possibility that perceived income may affect students' views of the prestige of the policing profession.

The fourth and final section of the survey pertained to participants' interactions with law enforcement and police. Past research has shown that previous interactions with police can significantly impact people's views of the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). Past encounters with police, especially negative encounters, can drastically alter people's views of the police (Skogan, 2007). Since past interactions with police can have an effect on views of the police, questions assessing interactions with police were incorporated into the survey in order to measure their effect on desire to enter policing. Participants were first questioned about whether or not they have had past interactions with police. If so, participants were asked another series of six 5-point likert scale questions about their past interactions with police taken from previous research on views and interactions of legal professionals (Abbott et al., 2018). These six questions were then summed into an index variable for police interactions that categorized participants' interactions with police on a 6-30 scale, with higher scores indicating more positive interactions with police. A complete list of each specific question contributing to the index variable for interactions with police is available in appendix two.

### **Survey Analyses**

Demographic information was taken from the survey on race, ethnicity, age, and gender. See above description of demographics of the study participants for further details. Due to the overwhelming majority of non-white white students participating in the study (N = 549), as well as the area demographics of the university, race and ethnicity were not used in the analysis of the data. Age did not account as a significant factor in the analyses as well and thus is omitted from analysis. Male and female genders were the only genders with enough participants to perform analyses so other genders were omitted from the analysis. As an oversampling of females (73.6% to 25.2% male) did occur, the survey results have been weighed to reflect the student population

of the university they are enrolled within (55% female, 45% male). Gender was weighted using statistical weighing methods and proportions (Sarraf & Chen, 2007).

A binomial logistic regression was performed to study the gender, interest or enrollment as a justice studies major/minor, views of police, interactions with police, and feelings of policing as a prestigious career have on one's desire to become a police officer.

### **Interview Recruitment**

I recruited students to partake in follow-up interviews for this study by asking them, at the end of the survey, if they would like to participate. Students who were interested in participating in the follow up interview were directed to a new Qualtrics survey separate from their anonymous and confidential survey. In this new survey, students provided their names and email addresses and were told that they would be contacted to schedule a follow-up interview. Those who stated that they were interested in participating in interviews were contacted via email to set up an interview time. A mutually convenient time was then scheduled with participants to set up an interview. Participants were informed that interviews would take approximately 30 minutes. A total of 42 follow-up interviews were conducted, consisting of 27 females and 15 males. Information was not collected regarding the participants' age, race, ethnicity, or other identifying demographic information.

### **Interview Instrument**

All interviews were conducted in the same office of a justice studies building on campus over the span of approximately one month throughout the spring of 2018. When participants arrived for their interviews, I presented them with a consent form that detailed information about the study, my obligations as a researcher, and their rights as a research participant. Interviews began only after participants' questions were answered and they had signed the consent form to

participate. All interviews were done using an audio recorder. Participants verbally agreed to the use of the recorder at the start of their interview. Interview times varied in length from 5 minutes to 25 minutes.

Participants were asked open-ended questions to gather additional information regarding their attitudes and opinions toward police officers and police employment. These questions were designed using similar rationale to the survey with the goal of developing a deeper understanding as to the reasons why people are choosing to or choosing not to enter policing. These questions were asked in order to examine how participants feel about police careers as well as why they feel this way.

First, participants were asked basic questions regarding their major at the university and if they were interested in being a justice studies major or minor. At this university, being a justice studies major/minor is commonly associated with students interested in legal professions such as policing. Participants were then asked about their views toward police and police officers. Past research has shown that people have conflicting views and opinions of police officers so establishing participants' opinions of police officers was an important question in beginning discussions of police with participants (Morin & Stepler, 2016). Next, interviewees were asked about the past interactions that they've had with law enforcement. People's views of the police are significantly affected by their past experiences with police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). Next, participants were asked about how seeing police in the media has changed or altered their views of police officers. This was asked in order to determine how and if recent news and media coverage of police officers has had an impact on students' views of police officers as a profession. Next, students were asked if they had ever considered entering a career in policing or law enforcement and why they had or had not considered this. This was the focal

point of the research in order to determine why students were or were not interested in being a police officer. Finally, students were asked how their views and experiences with police in addition to what they have seen with police in the media have influenced their decision to become a police officer. This final question provided a wrap-up question to the interview and allowed participants to speak about how their views of police, interactions with police, and thoughts of police in the media have influenced their decision of whether or not to enter policing. These questions were asked in order to examine how participants feel about police careers as well as why they feel this way.

### **Interview Analysis**

After interviews were completed, recorded interview data were uploaded to a secure UNH Box account via password-protected computers. These recordings were then deleted from the recorder. Once uploaded and deleted from the recording equipment, these recordings were transcribed. Recordings were fully transcribed and included all questions and answers from the interviews, although pauses and inaudible noises and sounds were not included in the transcriptions. Transcriptions were conducted both manually and by a professional transcription service. Any identifying information was omitted from the transcriptions. Once all of the recordings were transcribed, all copies of the recordings were deleted.

Transcriptions were then coded for common themes amongst the 42 interviews. Each transcript was analyzed and quotes and statements relevant to the research question were highlighted and identified. Responses were first analyzed for participants' responses regarding views toward police, interactions with police, perceptions of media coverage of police, factors encouraging respondents to enter police work, and factors deterring respondents from entering police work. Some statements applied to more than one area.



Participants' views of police officers were one common theme expressed during the interviews. Statements from participants regarding their thoughts on police were coded similarly and grouped into this one theme of views toward police. Second, participants' thoughts of their past interactions with police officers were coded into another theme. Descriptions as to how officers treated participants in their past interactions were identified and coded under this common theme. Third, students' reactions to seeing police in the media and how this has impacted their views of police were coded under a common theme. Included with this theme are statements from students regarding the credibility of media coverage of police and how the media coverage of police officers has altered any of their thoughts or opinions of police officers. Next, characteristics and qualities about being a police officer that participants listed as being attractive qualities of the job were coded into another common theme. This category included basic duties of the job that students found interesting or favorable, as well as any other factor that they described as motivating them to enter policing. Finally, characteristics and qualities about being a police officer that participants listed as being unattractive to them were coded into a common theme. Any aspect of policing or being a police officer that participants listed as being undesirable about entering the profession or deterring them away from being a police officer were included in this common theme.

### **Validity and Limitations**

The dual survey and interview component to this research study increases the overall validity of this study. The ability to obtain a large amount of survey data from participants is valuable in order to have an increased level of confidence in the statistical results involving that data. Additionally, the follow-up interviews provide an additional tool to measure and address why people are and are not interested in entering policing. Further in-depth information can be

obtained through the follow-up interviews that would otherwise be very difficult to obtain through a survey or other quantitative means. Likewise, the relatively small sample size of the interview data is complemented by the larger sample size of the survey, increasing its validity.

This study does also have its limitations with its methods. Being a convenience sample, this study risks not being fully inclusive of all students at the university. Additionally, given the demographics of both the survey respondents and the university, the inability of this study to draw conclusions regarding race, ethnicity, and age is another notable limitation of this study. While these limitations do exist, this study still provides an effective and reliable means to evaluate students' perceptions of police officers and policing careers.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to identify reasons why students choose not to enter the field of policing. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in order to answer this research question. Survey results suggest that while views and previous interactions with police do not influence one's desire to enter policing, whether or not students believe that policing is a prestigious profession is indicative of students' desire to pursue a career in policing. Interview results show that participants' share generally positive views and interactions with police. Further, interview results show that the portrayal of police in the media has differing effects on students' views of the police. Finally, interviews suggested that students' perceptions of the way that the public views police officers both positively and negatively impact their desire to become a police officer.

### **Quantitative**

A logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of gender, interest in a justice studies major or minor, views of police, interactions with police, and viewing policing as prestigious on the likelihood that participants were interested in policing as a career. The logistic regression model explained 47.5% (Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>) of the variance in interest in policing as a career and correctly classified 79.1% of cases. Males were 2.169 times more likely to be interested in policing than females. Those interested in the justice studies major or minor were 14.944 times more likely to be interested in policing than non-justice studies majors. Views of police and interactions with police were not significant predictors of interest in policing as a profession. Increasing views that policing was a prestigious career was associated with an increased interest in policing as a profession. A complete review of these statistics can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

*Summary of logistic regression analysis for variable predicting decisions to enter law enforcement careers (interest\_dichotomized), controlling for gender (gender), and being a justice studies major or minor (justice studies).*

Predictor	B	Interest_Dichotomized		Sig.
		S.E.	Exp(B)	
Male	.774	.226	2.169	.001**
Justice Studies	2.704	.237	14.944	.000***
Index_Views	.015	.024	1.015	.530
Index_Interactions	.045	.029	1.046	.125
Prestige	.414	.145	1.513	.004**
Constant	-5.283			

p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

### **Qualitative**

Transcripts from all 42 qualitative interviews were examined to identify commonalities amongst participant statements. Most interview participants had a positive view toward police and positive interactions with the police. There was more variability amongst respondents on the effects of media coverage of police on their views toward policing. Some indicated that media coverage of police pointed to systemic issues in policing. Others found that the coverage was biased or only highlighted the “bad apples” of police work. Finally, respondents cited their desire to help people and make a difference in their communities as reasons for entering the policing profession. On the other hand, participants cited the public’s negative attitudes toward the police as strong deterrents to them entering the field.

#### ***Views of police officers***

Participants were asked about their views about police and police officers. These views were identified and coded in the interview transcriptions. This question was asked before any other questions regarding police officers were asked in order to obtain an unbiased opinion from students about their views and thoughts of police.

Participants shared a generally positive view of police officers, stating that they have high respect for the work the police officers do. Most participants indicated that police officers were “just normal people doing their job” in their communities. Participants stated that they “view police in a very high regard” and that they “look up to them.” As another participant said during an interview, “Growing up, I’ve always been taught that I can always trust a police officer.” A common belief amongst participants was the notion that they respect the police and that they are just doing their job day-to-day. Students cited police work as being “noble” and that they “had a great amount of respect for the police.” Students also commonly noted that police officers were ordinary citizens doing a job to make a living. In the words of another participant, “They do their job. They’re not trying to get people in trouble.” Students largely felt that police officers were “there to help” and that they were “just doing their job.” While in a position of authority, most students did not feel as if police abused their power and they looked at police as trusted community members and oftentimes had friends, family, or neighbors involved in the profession. These positive views of police held true for most participants, however some had less favorable views of the police.

Those with somewhat less favorable views of the police cited that what they have “seen online” about police negatively affected their opinions of police officers; even so, they admitted that they believe most police officers are “good people.” These interviews suggest that students generally view police in a positive light and hold a lot of respect for the police, even if they have some negative thoughts about different concepts of policing. Some participants felt that police officers were “undertrained” and “sometimes racist.” These participants admitted that they maintained overall positive views toward police officers but that they believed that there were “some changes that could be made” to the profession. This is important in relation to policing

careers because it does not appear that students would choose not to enter the field of policing due to their unfavorable views of the police.

### ***Interactions with police***

Participants were also asked to describe their past interactions with police and law enforcement officers. These views were identified and coded in the interview transcriptions. Participants were asked about their past interactions with police in order to determine what type of interactions students' have previously had with police as well as the quality of these interactions. Transcripts from all 42 qualitative interviews were examined to identify commonalities amongst participant statements.

As with their views of police officers, most respondents identified having had positive interactions with police officers in the past. Participants often cited that the officers in their interactions were "reasonable," "professional," and "fair." One student cited that they believed that police officers were "a good tool based on my interactions." Students said that they have felt that their past dealings with police have been reasonable because "no police officer has been out trying to get me in trouble." Students frequently cited that their interactions with police "increased their respect" for police officers. Participants generally felt that police officers were simply doing their job and were reasonable with them in exercising their authority.

Those who did say that they had somewhat of a negative police interaction also stated that their other police interactions have been positive. Students often cited that they had either had zero or "just one" negative interactions with police. One student cited that in a past encounter with police that they "pepper sprayed an entire party." Others cited police officers in past interactions as being "a little overbearing." However, students admitted that these interactions did stay with them when they thought of police officers, but that their other positive

interactions with police gave them positive views toward law enforcement as a whole. Generally, even if participants had a negative interaction with the police in the past, it did not largely impact their overall views of police officers.

Attitude was another major characteristic mentioned by participants during interviews. The officer's attitude was a major indicator of how participants viewed their past interactions with police. Participants who viewed that officer as having a "professional" and "respectful" attitude viewed their interactions with police in a more positive light. On the contrary, students who viewed the police as having a more "aggressive" or "rude" attitude tended to view their police interaction more negatively. However even students viewing the officer as having a negative attitude admitting that they still viewed officers as just doing their job and that "Police officers don't have an obligation to be nice to you." Students often stated that they believed that being a police officer was a stressful job and that they understood why officers may be more "aggressive" and "confrontational" at the beginning of an interaction until they got comfortable.

Other participants cited specific positive interactions with police such as "paying to fill up my car when I ran out of gas" or "calling me because they found my debit card." These types of positive police interactions stayed with students and quickly came to mind when they discussed their past dealings with police. According to another student, "I've had countless experiences where I was like wow that was really helpful." Students stated that interactions like these made their views toward police more positive because it showed them that police were "just helpful human beings."

Other participants said that their interactions with police have reinforced their desire to join police departments in the future. As one participant said, "having these positive interactions makes me happy to hopefully be working with them in the future." Many students interested in

joining police departments cited their past experiences with police officers as motivating factors to their desire to enter the field. One student spoke of the effect of their past police interactions on their career choice by saying “my positive interactions with police have definitely made me want to go into it more.” This helps to suggest that having positive interactions with police can be helpful in leading someone that is considering entering the field of policing to do so. These views of participants’ interactions with police are important because there is some evidence to suggest that having positive interactions with police increases students’ views toward police officers and may serve as a positive influence when students consider policing careers.

### ***The influence of media***

Participants felt that the media had influenced their perceptions of police and policing careers. Participants’ perceptions regarding the media coverage of police were more mixed than their views and interactions. Many participants stated that the media coverage of police shows systemic issues in the policing field with equal treatment of citizens and racial inequality. Other participants also stated that they were skeptical of the media coverage of police because they did not feel like it presented a full and accurate depiction of the events in question and that they did not feel as if they could judge those incidents with the information presented by the media. Many participants also cited their belief that negative coverage of police in the media has led them to see faults in police officers as well as for them to believe that there are “bad apples” in policing.

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. As one student stated, “This stuff has been going on for many years and now with social media we just find out about it a lot quicker.” Participants were quick to admit that police officers “get a very bad reputation” in the media today and that “there have definitely been issues with police brutality.”



Other participants have stated that the media coverage of police has shown them the “militarization of the police” and that they believe that this is a negative for law enforcement. Others have stated that seeing police portrayed in the media has caused them to have concerns about police treatment of minorities and non-whites. As one respondent said, “I worry about the safety of my friends who aren’t necessarily Caucasian.” Another student had similar beliefs from media coverage of police and stated “African Americans get treated very differently by police than a white person would.” This represents issues for police recruiting as many students are viewing these incidents featuring police misconduct and it is leading them to have negative views about the profession from what they are seeing secondhand in the media. As one participant put it, “I put police officers less on a pedestal now. I used to view them as kind of real life superheroes but now I’m more aware that police officers are human too and that they do make mistakes.” This demonstrated the negative consequences that the media coverage of police can have on attitudes toward police. However, this was not the view of all students in their thoughts and attitudes toward police.

Many participants stated that seeing incidents of police misconduct and brutality in the media did not change their views and attitudes toward police. Students expressed skepticism that the media coverage of police was entirely accurate and that it really depicted the entire story of an incident. Many students believed that these incidents were only a partial depiction of the incident in question, with one student saying “you’re getting 10-15 seconds of what happened, nothing before and nothing after so you don’t really know what happened to lead up to that use of force.” Other participants shared similar points of view stating that “some media stories have been blown out of proportion” and that “the media wants people watching the news to view that story in a certain light.” Many students found it difficult to place themselves in the officer’s

footsteps stating, “we don’t know all of the variables in that situation.” This is important because it suggests that there is uncertainty present about some police interactions in the media and that some students feel that the media has not influenced their views of police.

Another factor that was common in looking how the media impacted students’ views and opinions toward police officers was the notion that the incidences of police brutality and misconduct in the media represent a very select minority of police officers and that most police officers are not like the few depicted in these incidents in the media. Because of this, many participants stated that they continued to hold a positive view of police because they do not believe that most police officers abused their power and position. Many students stated that they believed that these select few that were depicted in the media were the “bad apples” or “bad eggs” of policing. Participants described police officers in incidences of police brutality as being one of “a few bad apples in the career.” As another student stated, “there are some bad eggs in the bunch.” Other students shared similar views stating that “there are bad people in every job, and police are no exception to that.” Even students who were interested in a career in law enforcement stated that in the media “there were definitely instances where the police officer was at fault, and that was one bad egg I guess.” This is important to police recruitment as many students feel that when incidences of police misconduct do occur, that they are occurring from a minority of police officers and that these officers’ actions are not indicative of the way the majority of police officers act. This suggests that the media may not influence why students decide not to become a police officer.

### ***Positive influence of job characteristics***

Students were also asked in the interviews about the factors and job characteristics regarding policing that attract them to the field of policing and that they would enjoy the most

about working as a police officer. These positive attributes of policing careers were also coded in the interview transcriptions. There were common job attributes and characteristics that participants stated were attractive to them in being a police officer. Most commonly, students stated that the ability to “help people,” “make a true difference,” and “do something different every day” were positives that would attract them to becoming a police officer. Additionally, being a part of the community was a big factor that participants listed as an attractive characteristic to policing. The ability to give back and help people were some of the most common themes from participants as why they wanted to be police officers. As one participant said, “law enforcement is something that if you do it right, you can help a lot of people.” This is important to police recruitment as it gives insight as to what students are perceiving as the best qualities of a policing job.

Students also frequently cited the negative media coverage and negative attitudes of the public toward police officers as a factor that would push them to join policing more. Participants spoke about how they were drawn to the field because they wanted to show people skeptical about the police the good that police officers can do and that not all police officers are like the negative stories seen in the media. As one student said, “Seeing the negative stigma about police in the media, it makes me want to show that that’s not how every single officer is...they’re not all bad.” Similarly another student said that they’re drawn more toward policing due to the media coverage because “I can try to eliminate the stereotype that police have and show people most cops are out there not to shoot them but to help them.” Participants stated their desire to “show how police officers can benefit the community” and to “show that we’re there to help and not make situations worse.” This is important because despite the negative stories about police, not all students are deterred from becoming police officers. In fact, some are motivated to become

police officers even more. Students want to take the public criticism and distaste toward the police and enter the field of policing in order to try to change these attitudes.

### ***Negative influence of job characteristics***

Finally, factors and characteristics about the field of policing that are unattractive to students and serve as a deterrent to them entering the field of policing were asked of the participants. These factors were identified and coded in the interview transcriptions.

Common themes of job characteristics that participants identified as being unattractive to them about policing included the safety of the job and being tough enough for the job. Participants often cited police work as a “dangerous profession” and said that they would prefer a job that did not have as much risk associated with it. One student cited her/his concerns with the danger of being a police officer by saying, “I like a safe job because I want to have a family one day, and I don’t want my family waiting up to make sure I come home.” Students also spoke about not being “tough enough” for the job of a police officer. Frequently, students were concerned that their size and physical stature was not suitable for the profession of a police officer. Phrases like “I’m a tiny person” and “I’m not tough enough” were common amongst participants concerned about their size allowing them to do the job of a police officer well. These perceptions about being a police officer and the characteristics about police officers that participants have are important in identifying reasons why people do not want to enter policing.

The most common reason amongst participants of factors deterring them from becoming a police officer was the perceived stigma and reputation that they believe that police officers have today. Students cited the disrespect and public criticism that police officers face on a constant basis as major deterrents for them wanting to enter the field. One student described the impact that public attitudes about police is having on her desire to enter policing as follows: “I

definitely think the general distaste toward police officers has made me walk away from the idea. I think that the biggest reason that I wouldn't is just because there is that negative connotation about police officers. I wouldn't be able to deal with knowing that without any context, they're going to maybe have a hatred toward me." As another student similarly stated, "It's a job where you know everybody's going to automatically hate you." These quotes are just a few of the many from participants identifying the way that people think of police today as major reasons for why they do not want to be involved in the field.

Students identified the lack of respect for police officers today as being more of a reason why they do not want to become police officers, or why they are at least thinking twice about it. As one student said, "I feel like police officers don't get as much respect now. That's just how people look at police officers now. I'd want more respect than that in my career." Similarly, one student said, "I just feel like I would not be getting the respect from others that I would in another field." Another student spoke of the respect that police receive today by saying, "Respect of the police right now, it's not great. It wouldn't make me enter the field." These quotes help to illustrate the belief amongst students that police officers are not respected in society today.

Even students that identified as being interested in policing careers admitted that the media coverage and public attitudes toward the police have made them think twice about entering the profession. As another student said, "The way that police are represented today in popular culture has definitely slowed me down a bit. I'm not sprinting toward it now." Participants identified the police as having a bad stigma and worried that as a police officer, they would be associated with the poor behavior of other officers or the negative representation of police in the media. One student spoke of policing as, "I wouldn't wanna be a police officer. There's too much of, I guess, a stigma now" while another student similarly said, "I think that

the stigma behind police had really deterred me away from it.” Students also expressed their concerns over the negative backlash they would face from the public, even if they were doing their jobs normally every day. Another student spoke to this saying “Even if you don’t do something bad, you’re going to be associated with police officers that are misbehaving, which isn’t attractive. If a police officer in Mississippi does something wrong then there’s backlash against police officers in New York.” Overall, students identified as having a profession that is looked well upon by others and that is well respected. Since they do not view policing as being respected by others, they are keeping away from entering the field and becoming a police officer.

## **Discussion**

My research study examined college students' interest and impressions of policing careers. I obtained data via an online Qualtrics survey and voluntary follow-up interviews. Survey data suggest a relationship between the belief that policing is a prestigious career and the subsequent desire to enter law enforcement. Building from this, interviews I conducted with students further provide evidence that students take public perceptions of the police into account when considering future careers. Students' beliefs that people have negative views of the police serve mostly as a deterrent to students to entering the field, but they also motivate others toward joining the field.

### **Views and Interactions**

In this study, most students reported having overall positive views and interactions with police officers. This aligns with previous research that has found that a majority of Americans have positive attitudes and opinions of the police (Fingerhut, 2017). Additionally, students frequently expressed that they had previously had mainly positive interactions with police officers and that they were treated fairly during these interactions. This supports past research that having the belief that an interaction with a police officer is fair leads to a positive relationship between police and the community (Bradford et al., 2007). Students are largely supportive of police officers and police departments as a whole and believe that they are serving a good purpose in the community.

One area that this study examined that past research has not looked at previously was in examining the relationship between people's views and interactions with police and their level of interest in becoming a police officer. This study did not find a statistically significant relationship between either overall views of the police and desire to enter law enforcement or

past interactions with police and desire to enter law enforcement. Interview data suggest that past interactions may be a contributing factor enhancing the desire for those already interested in pursuing law enforcement careers but generally neither views nor interactions with police were highly indicative to someone wanting to become a police officer based on interview data

### **Prestige**

Another area of research that this study examined was the relationship between perceived prestige of policing careers and desire to be a police officer. Previous research has shown that the belief that policing is a prestigious career is a major contributor to why people enter the field of policing (Lester, 1983; Foley, Guarmeri, & Kelly, 2007). However, past research has not examined whether the opposite of this is true – that is, if people do not enter policing because they do not believe that it is a prestigious career. Additionally, past research has shown prestige is an important motivating factor for those entering the medical field (Azizzadeh, McCollum, Miller, Holliday, Shilstone, & Lucci, 2003). Survey data in this study suggest that the perception of policing as a prestigious career is statistically significant in whether someone is interested or not in becoming a police officer, with those seeing the profession as less prestigious being less likely to want to enter the field. This statistical finding is complemented by the findings from the interviews with students. Students often cited their desire to enter a profession well-looked upon by others and to them, policing was not a career that they felt others would look well upon.

The finding that prestige was a significant indicator as to whether students were interested in policing careers adds significantly to the literature on police recruiting. Past research has not examined reasons why people decide not to enter careers in law enforcement and policing. It is unclear why prestige is a significant indicator of interest in policing while both views and prior interactions with police officers were not significant indicators of entering the



profession. One possibility is that while students are not associating their personal views of police officers with what they see in the media, they may associate others' views of police officers and the prestige of the profession with what they see in the media. Subsequently, their views of policing as prestigious may be influenced by what they see in the media. One suggestion from the literature would be that these stances would differ by one's upbringing and one's parents' views of policing, with students having similar views and attitudes of their parents (Sindall, McCarthy, & Brunton-Smith, 2017). If this is true, then one would expect that students and parents would have similar viewpoints of whether or not policing is a prestigious career.

### **The Media**

The interview component of this study allowed for a deeper understanding of how views of police, past interactions with police, and police in the media together all affect students' desires to enter policing. While some students appeared skeptical of the negative image that the media paints of police, many students admitted that they believed that seeing incidents of police violence and misconduct in the media shows signs of a larger problem in policing. Many students believed that the public has negative feelings toward the police even though past research has shown that a majority of Americans actually have positive feelings of the police (Fingerhut, 2017). Students did not feel that police officers today are respected in the line of work that they are doing and students themselves want to be in a line of work that is respected and looked well upon by others.

The perceived public distaste toward police officers was the largest reason cited in interviews of why students did not want to become police officers. However, some students did state that this public distaste for police officers actually motivates them to become police officers in order to try to change the way that people think of police officers. These students wanted to

show people that police officers could be a helpful resource to their communities and that they were always there to assist others.

This dual effect that the media has on students' motivations to become a police officer is interesting and worth examining further. This leads to an important question of why the media's portrayal of police officers leads some students to want to become police while deterring others from becoming officers. Additionally, it appears as if students believe that the public has a much more negative view of police officer than actually exists. Fingerhut (2017) found that the American public has largely positive views of police officers, although other research has shown that minorities have a larger amount of distrust toward police officers (Morin & Stepler, 2016). Future research should further examine why people believe that the American public has such a negative view of police when in fact past research has shown otherwise.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are some limitations to this study that should be taken into account in applying the conclusions of this study to outside of academia. As much as the population of this study can be seen as a highlight of this study with young college students, this is also a limitation. This study fails to account for those who are not attending a four-year university are not interested in policing. With most police departments only formally requiring a high school diploma for employment as a police officer, it is also important to take into account high school aged students thinking about their future careers, trade school students, and military service members who are all not attending four-year universities. Future research should examine if differences amongst these different groups.

An additional limitation of this study is that due to the demographics of the specific university population, getting a racially diverse population was not possible. While these results

relate largely to white college-aged students, they may differ for those of other races or ethnicities at other universities or other parts of the country. Future research should further examine the perceptions of policing careers on minority college students in the United States in order to see if racial or ethnic differences exist. This would be particularly helpful for departments aiming to increase diversity in their departments by attracting minority applicants.

Future research should examine whether different types of police interactions such as arrests, traffic stops, etc. have an effect on desire to be a police officer. While interactions with police officers not significant in this study, there may be differences based on the type of interaction that someone has with a police officer. In regard to prestige, future research should further examine factors that affect the perceived prestige of the profession and if and how those perceptions have changed over time. Future research should also examine how police departments brand their employment opportunities to the public and if rebranding their officer positions as more prestigious would have an effect on interest in these vacancies.

The structure of this study also leads to some additional limitations. As this study occurred throughout one college semester, student responses may be influenced by current events. A follow-up study examining changes and similarities in student responses in a subsequent semester would increase the reliability of this study data by showing any longitudinal changes over time. Additionally, this survey-portion of this study ask students about how their views of police are influenced by the media. This survey also only asked one question about policing as a prestigious career. A future research study examining the relationship between the media and views of police as well as further examining characteristics of prestige and policing will help to provide more insight as to why people think the way that they do about police officers.

Additionally, future research should examine the recruitment and application process for police departments. Identifying differences in how police both recruit and screen applicants may be able to better address issues for police departments in finding quality candidates to fill their vacancies. By measuring how departments advertise their vacancies as well as examining the testing and hiring process of police officers, future research may be able to identify obstacles to the police recruitment and hiring processes.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, belief as to whether or not policing is a prestigious career is an important variable in determining interest in the field of policing. Increased perceptions that policing is prestigious relates with an increased desire to enter the field of policing. Additionally, students' perceptions of how the public views police officers is also influential toward their desire to become a police officer, serving as a deterrent for many students while acting as a motivator for others. These conclusions are supported by both the quantitative survey findings and the qualitative interview findings of this study. This is important for police administrators and recruiters moving forward as they market their departments and their professions at career fairs and informational sessions for students. Adapting their recruitment message to present their officers as prestigious members of the community that can make a real difference may help to improve interest in students in officer vacancies. Police administrators should take the image that the media has given police officers into account as they recruit new officers. Listening to potential recruits' concerns about how police are portrayed in the media and addressing these concerns appropriately may assist police departments in helping people to understand more about modern-day policing and may serve to increase views and attitudes toward policing and policing careers.

This research merits future considerations for future research. In addition to the future research described above, future research should examine the influence of the media on people's perceptions of policing as a prestigious career. If prestige is an indicator of career choice, then understanding factors that increase and decrease policing's perceived prestige needs to be examined. Additionally, future research should examine the ways that police departments have attempted to combat their recruitment issues in law enforcement and establish which measures have been effective tools for recruitment and which measures have not been effective. This would be important for police administrators in order to determine how to best utilize their recruiting budgets. Finally, future research should examine the hiring process for police officers in order to determine whether hiring standards are appropriate for police departments or act as a deterrent for candidates due to the hiring process. While not examined in this study, comparing the hiring standards and processes of different police departments may serve as a beneficial tool of developing a best practices tool for police hiring and recruitment.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A: POLICE VIEWS STUDY INSTRUMENT**

### **Views of Policing**

The table below shows the individual questions that were asked to students that comprised the index variable for students' views of police. Each question was asked on a five-point likert scale with the responses strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Responses were coded 1-5 with strongly disagree being coded as one and strongly agree being coded as five. The question regarding police bias was reverse scored when creating the index variable to remain consistent with other questions in the listing. The index variable for views of police was constructed by summing students' coded numerical responses to these eleven questions, creating an index variable ranging from 11-55. The index variable for views of police has a mean of 38.695 with a standard deviation of 7.525.