

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE NARRATIVES SURROUNDING POLICING:
INTERVIEWS WITH CRIMINAL JUSTICE STUDENTS AND PUBLIC
INFORMATION OFFICERS**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the current narratives surrounding policing as well as the media's impact on these narratives. Interviews with undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas Christian University and public information officers in the Dallas/Fort Worth area were conducted to explore opinions on the media's framing of policing as well as opinions on the field of policing. Results of student interviews suggest that differences exist between men and women in attitudes toward policing, that the media's current presentation of policing may dissuade students from considering police work as a career, and that investing in a college degree may be a factor in deterring students from considering police work as a career. Results of officer interviews suggest that officers find a college degree to be helpful in the operation of their roles, that officers are generally concerned for the future of policing but believe that community-based policing tactics may help improve community relations, and that officers feel that the media has recently placed policing under a microscope.

INTRODUCTION

The field of policing has recently been scrutinized due to controversial and widely publicized police use of force incidents (Siegel, 2020). Therefore, this study examined the current narratives surrounding policing through interviews with college students majoring in criminal justice at Texas Christian University, as well as interviews with public information officers in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The goals of this research were to examine what factors may influence the current perceptions and opinions that criminal justice students have of police officers, as well as the potential factors that may influence public information officers' opinions on the current state of policing. Several guiding questions were utilized throughout this study. First, what are the current perceptions that criminal justice students have of policing and what factors influence these opinions? Second, what are the current perceptions that public information officers have of policing and what factors influence these opinions? Finally, how might officer perceptions be different from student perceptions?

Initial findings suggest that participant sex, the media's presentation of law enforcement, as well as investing in obtaining a college degree are factors that may impact student perceptions and opinions. Having a college degree, feelings of concern for the future of policing, and the media's presentation of law enforcement are factors that may impact public information officer perceptions and opinions.

METHODS

This was an exploratory, qualitative study that aimed to better understand the narratives surrounding policing through the opinions of college students with majors in criminal justice as well as the opinions of public information officers. According to previous research, qualitative research is most beneficial for examining "complex, new or relatively unexplored areas" (Clarke,

& Jack, p. 1, 1998). Qualitative research is capable of uncovering information about “persons’ lives, lived experiences, [behaviors], emotions, and feelings as well as about organization functioning, social movements, [and] cultural phenomena...[a] qualitative research approach...holistically understands the human experience in specific settings” (Rahman, p. 2-3, 2016). Additionally, qualitative research is best suited for obtaining a large amount of information and for the study of individual cases or events, as well as in research with small sample sizes (Rahman, 2016). Because the current research aimed to examine the complex, multi-faceted topic of the current narratives surrounding policing, and, additionally, had a small sample size, a qualitative approach to research was utilized.

In total, five criminal justice students at Texas Christian University who were graduating in May of 2022, as well as four public information officers from departments in the Dallas/Fort Worth area were interviewed. Criminal justice students were selected as participants due to the content of courses offered for criminal justice majors at Texas Christian University. Senior criminal justice students at Texas Christian University will have taken courses such as CRJU 30613 *Police in a Free Society*, CRJU 30633 *Federal Law Enforcement*, or CRJU 30653 *Controversial Issues in Policing*, for example. Because the present study aimed to examine perceptions and opinions of law enforcement, criminal justice students, who have obtained a basic knowledge of policing as well as possess an interest in the field of criminal justice, were a population of interest. Public information officers, or officers who act as liaisons between law enforcement agencies and the media, were additionally selected to participate in the present study (Surette, 2001). Because the current research aimed to examine perceptions of law enforcement, public information officers, who work closely with the media, were a population of interest.

According to existing research, “samples in qualitative research tend to be small in order to support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry. Additionally, qualitative samples are...selected by virtue of their capacity to provide richly-textured information, relevant to the phenomenon under investigation” (Vasileiou, et al., pp. 2, 2018). Because the current research aimed to obtain detailed and extensive accounts of information on the opinions of both students and public information officers, small sample sizes were utilized for both participant populations. Additionally, there are relatively few full-time public information officers employed within the Dallas/Fort Worth area, which limited the number of public information officer participants who could be interviewed for the purpose of this research. Further, there is not a large population of criminal justice students at Texas Christian University, which limited the number of student participants who could be interviewed. Finally, no compensation could be provided to any participants in this research.

Purposive convenience sampling, or the sampling of participants based on their accessibility and proximity to the research, was utilized to obtain both student and public information officer participants (Jager, Putnick, & Bornstein, 2017). Convenience sampling was utilized in the current research due to its cost-effectiveness and efficiency (Jager, Putnick, & Bornstein, 2017). Each participant was interviewed once, with interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes to one hour each. All interviews were conducted through Zoom over the course of January 2022 to March 2022. Zoom was used to conduct participant interviews in order to download transcriptions for analysis after the completion of each interview.

Six questions were asked of students (Appendix A), and six questions were asked of public information officers (Appendix B). Questions for students included: “How did you decide to major in criminal justice?”, “What is your opinion on the media’s presentation of police

officers?”, “What is your opinion on social media’s presentation of hashtags and campaigns like “#blacklivesmatter”, #alllivesmatter, etc.?””, “Does what you see in the media influence your desire to either go into or not go into police work?”, “How has the decision to obtain a bachelor’s degree impacted your career aspirations?”, and “Is there anything else I haven’t asked you already that you think I should know?”. Questions for public information officers included: “How did you decide to become a public information officer?”, “What is your opinion on the media’s presentation of police officers?”, “What is your opinion on social media’s presentation of hashtags and campaigns like “#blacklivesmatter”, #alllivesmatter, etc.?””, “Do you have a college degree?”, “Are you concerned about the future of policing? Why or why not?”, and “Is there anything else I haven’t asked you already that you think I should know?”.

In addition to these six base questions, follow-up questions were asked of participants during interviews. These questions varied during each individual interview, but all followed the general theme of the base question being asked. These follow-up questions were utilized to obtain more information from participants when necessary. For example, in question two, asked of students: “What is your opinion on the media’s presentation of police officers?” (Appendix A), a common follow-up question was, “Does this impact the way that you view police officers?” Similarly, in question two, asked of public information officers: “What is your opinion on the media’s presentation of police officers?” (Appendix B), a common follow-up question was, “Does this impact the way that you operate in your role?”

Finally, all data was analyzed using grounded theory. Grounded theory, a method that may be utilized in qualitative research, is used to derive theory in an iterative manner from data (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019). Individual themes were identified in each participant’s interview through the coding of Zoom transcriptions. Common themes were then identified across both

student and public information officer interviews separately as well as in relation to each other. This was done through constant comparative analysis, a method used to develop concepts in data through simultaneous analyzing and coding, and axial coding, piecing data together in a way that enables connections between categories (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019; Kolb, 2012). All material regarding participant interviews was securely stored in Texas Christian University's Box Cloud File Storage software.

RESULTS

Three prevalent themes were identified in both student and public information officer interviews. In student interviews, these themes were differences between men and women's attitudes toward policing, the media's current presentation of policing acting as a deterrent for students when considering going into policing, as well as investing a college degree acting as a factor in deterring students from considering police work as a career. In interviews with public information officers, these themes were officers finding a college degree to be helpful in the operation of their roles, general concern among officers regarding the future of policing, and officers feeling that the media has recently placed policing under a microscope.

THEMES AMONG STUDENTS

Sex Differences in Attitudes Toward Policing

The first theme discovered through interviews with students was a difference in opinions toward policing between male and female participants. This theme occurred in all five student interviews. Participants' sex appeared to have an influence on their beliefs surrounding policing, with males demonstrating more supportive viewpoints of law enforcement, and females demonstrating more critical viewpoints of law enforcement. As one male student participant reported:

“I have the utmost respect for them [officers], the media does not really influence how I feel...I think [the way that] the media portrays officers...is unfair.”

In contrast to this student’s opinion, one female student reported:

“I think I’ve definitely started to view police officers through more of a critical lens. I think I’m quick to believe...if there is a story or a headline about an officer involved shooting, I think I’m quicker to believe [the] victim [as opposed to the officer(s) involved].”

Media Presentation of Policing as a Deterrent

The second theme discovered through interviews with students was that the media’s portrayal of policing acts as a deterrent for criminal justice students when they consider whether to pursue police work as a career. This theme occurred in four of five student interviews. Four of the criminal justice students who were interviewed felt that they would not want to go into law enforcement, but that this was largely due to the media’s presentation of officers, as opposed to the content of the courses they had taken. For example, one student participant reported:

“I think that the media definitely discouraged me [from considering a career in law enforcement], which is sad...but I don’t think that being a criminal justice major changed my mind either way.”

This opinion was echoed by another student participant who said:

“I learn about police officers in criminal justice classes [where] I’m more likely to view [them] in an intellectual...technical...way, but If I view media about police officers and officer involved shootings, I’m more likely to be empathetic or sympathetic towards victims...[it’s more about my] feelings...media coverage does make me want to go into the field of criminal justice and be an advocate, but not a police officer. I think it [the media] creates kind of a stigma...[which makes me] not want to be a police officer.”

Investing in Obtaining a College Degree as a Deterrent

The final theme discovered through interviews with students was that investing in obtaining a college degree appears to further deter students from considering police work as a career. This theme occurred in four of five interviews with students. While the content of the degree or

majoring in criminal justice did not appear to be a deterrent for students, investing time and resources into obtaining a college degree in general appeared to act as a deterrent. As one student participant reported:

“I think that if I hadn’t pursued a bachelor’s degree, if I hadn’t pursued higher education, I would definitely be more open to the idea of going into police work...like, [would I be] selling myself short to go back and do something that doesn’t require that [a college degree] in the first place?”

Echoing the feelings of the first participant, another student reported:

“The fact that you can be a police officer without a bachelor’s degree, it’s like why did I spend all this money to go to school...[if] I’m not going to utilize the resources that I would...gain from that degree. Being in student debt...I want that to be worth [it].”

One additional example of this theme can be seen in the following student’s opinion:

“I went through all this work...[to be] successful, but instead [would be] going to do a job that...in some counties you can have a GED to do...[it would be] closing the door on other potential opportunities [to pursue a career as a police officer].”

THEMES AMONG PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS

The Benefit of a College Degree in Policing

The first theme discovered through interviews with public information officers was the belief that a college education was beneficial in the operation of their roles. Three of four public information officers who were interviewed had bachelor’s degrees. Two public information officers who were interviewed, additionally, had master’s degrees. Of the public information officers who had college degrees, all three reported feeling that their degrees were beneficial to them as officers. While all three officers felt that their degrees were beneficial in their roles, not all officers who were interviewed had degrees in either criminal justice or criminology. One public information officer participant with a degree in kinesiology reported:

“I do think it [the college degree] helped me in this role in the sense that it just gave me a little bit more life experience...when I went to college, I played soccer

and...getting to have a wide variety of people [who] you have to get along with...I think, [is beneficial] in this line of work.”

Another public information officer with a degree in criminology who echoed this statement, stated:

“It [the college degree] really opened up and broadened my views and thinking...[and] has made me a little bit more patient...and sympathetic...I really applaud people more now than I used to who got involved in criminal behavior and have set themselves right.”

Finally, one public information officer with a degree in criminal justice reported:

“In truth...it [the college degree] helps you build more of a platform to be able to explain your position and have educated arguments on positions within law enforcement. It helps me be more transparent in my job...I need to be educated; I need to know what I’m doing...it makes you more legitimate.”

General Concern Regarding the Future of Policing and the Need for Community-Based Tactics

The second theme discovered through interviews with public information officers was a feeling of general concern regarding the future of policing due to various reasons. This theme occurred in all four interviews with public information officers. When describing their concern regarding the future of policing, two officers described concern for the current lack of trust of police departments by the communities that they serve, as well as discussed community-based policing tactics as a method to restore this trust. Two of four officers additionally expressed concern regarding pay as a barrier to potential applicants. One participant, for example, stated:

“I’m a little concerned about the future of policing...we’ve had people [who] won’t come to our department because [of the pay]...many of the agencies are going to have to start figuring out a pay system that makes it worthwhile and the partnerships growing in the community are going to have to increase...it’s about...building those relationships and improving trust.”

Another public information officer stated:

“My concerns are getting qualified people into this profession [who] are going to stay with it over the long haul and are willing to invest themselves in the community where they work...to build that trust and to build that relationship...my concern for law enforcement is not putting that community engagement piece front and center...[when examining] where the relationship with law enforcement and the communities trust in law enforcement [is now], [it is clear that] we...have to...[get] those relationships back and [earn] that trust back.”

Finally, one public information officer stated:

“I think my concern really...my biggest concern is winning back folks [who] we’ve lost...winning back [people’s trust] ...is just going to be an ongoing effort.”

Media Placing the Field of Policing Under a Microscope

The final theme discovered through interviews with public information officers was the opinion among officers that the media has recently placed the field of policing under a microscope.

Officers reported that this has impacted the way that they operate within their roles to varying degrees. This theme occurred in three of four interviews with public information officers. As one participant stated:

“It’s not very good [the media’s presentation of police officers]...they [the media] have to do their job and they have to make their money and they’re going to put out what sells...[due to this] I’m extra cautious...and try to get [stories] where I don’t have to go on camera and immediately answer because I want to have time to...go to some resources that I have that have a little more knowledge.”

Another public information officer echoed this previous statement, reporting:

“I wish there [were] more positive stories that went out about police, but I also know that media is a business...but the part that does get frustrating is when it generates increased hatred towards law enforcement...with the media, I’m just mindful that...all of my actions now are under more of a microscope because law enforcement as a whole is under more of a microscope.”

Finally, one public information officer commented:

“Media is often driven by the narrative that sells. I don’t place a lot of weight on it, but the release of the stories can affect how the public responds to officers. As

a PIO [public information officer], I try to make sure the good information surrounding law enforcement is shared with the public as often as possible.”

DISCUSSION

Results from this research provide insight into potential factors that currently influence the perceptions and opinions that criminal justice students have of law enforcement, as well as the potential factors that may influence public information officers' opinions on the current state of policing. Based on the results of the current study, several conclusions may be drawn. First, the role of education may play out differently between officers and students. Students and public information officers appear to view the role of education differently. Next, the media appears to influence opinions surrounding policing. Both students and police believe that the media has impacted policing. Finally, sex may influence student opinions on policing.

Three of four public information officers interviewed during the course of the present study had undergraduate college degrees. Every public information officer who had a degree emphasized its utility in the operation of their role as an officer during their interview. Previous research on the relationship between education and police officer performance, conducted by Scott Smith and Michael Aamodt (1997), found significant correlations between education and measures of performance in police officers. Officer performance was measured through communication skills, response to new training, public relations skills, and report writing skills. However, the “benefits of a college education [did] not become apparent until police officers gain[ed] experience” in the field (Smith & Aamodt, p. 1, 1997).

Of the officers with degrees in the present study, one had a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in criminology, one had both a bachelor's degree and master's degree in criminology, and another had a bachelor's degree in kinesiology. All three of these public information officers felt that their degrees were extremely beneficial to them in their

respective positions. As supported by the previously mentioned research conducted by Smith and Aamodt (1997), one officer in the present research described their education as being extremely beneficial after gaining experience in the field of policing. This officer, who had both a bachelor's degree and master's degree in criminology, commented, "I hated theory as an undergrad... [but] then I became a police officer and [went] to grad school...now I love theory because I have things that I can think back to and reference [while on the job] ...because I have experience with people and things and places that go back to what...theory is trying to explain."

Additionally, one officer in the present research reported feeling that their degrees helped to legitimize them and the actions that they took as an officer in the eyes of the public. This officer reported, "As an officer with an undergraduate degree, you gain more confidence from the community because of your commitment to education and higher education... [that] ties right back to your profession. The takeaway is that... [higher education enables the public to] trust in us." In previous research conducted on the public's opinion of the perceived benefits of officers' high levels of education, topics such as sensitivity to minorities, authoritarianism, and use of force were perceived more favorably by the public when officers had a college education (Nagosky, 2007).

Research on higher education and police behavior, conducted by Jason Rydberg and William Terrill (2010), also suggests that college educated officers are significantly less likely to implement the use of force than officers without college educations (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Offering further support for the results of this research, one officer in the present study commented, "When I went to college...getting to have a wide variety of people [who] you have to get along with...I think, was one of those things that just rolls into...regular life, especially in this line of work when you're working in the community and you're supposed to help anybody

and everybody. It makes it...easy to see that everyone's different and...[helps me to] not make assumptions.”

While all public information officers with college degrees in the present study emphasized the utility of their degrees in the operation of their roles as officers, the majority of student participants appeared to feel that investing in a college degree was a factor that discouraged them from considering a career in policing. Many student participants felt that the time and resources they had invested into obtaining a college degree would not be “worth it” were they to pursue a career in policing going forward. As one participant commented when asked if they would consider a career in policing, “I want to... [reach] a little higher to see what else I can pull out of that education, I think. Definitely.” As another student commented, “My mindset, respectfully, is that this degree is going to open doors [so] I'm going to go into a door that it's going to open and not a door that was previously open without the degree. I think that's out of respect and homage to the sacrifices that my parents [made] for me to go to college and all of the hard work that I put myself through to achieve something for my family and myself.”

While student respondents felt that investing in a college degree was a factor that discouraged them from considering a career in policing, there is currently little research on college students and the impact of higher education on the consideration of careers in law enforcement. Further research should be conducted in this area, specifically. While existing research on this specific topic is limited, research has been conducted on college students' attitudes, values, and opinions as well as ways that they may shift during students' time in college. Previous research, conducted by Armand Chatard and Leila Selimbegovic (2007), suggests that “students tend to become more egalitarian and tolerant with higher education”

(Chatard & Selimbegovic, p. 1., 2007). Therefore, it is also possible that students in the present study felt that a career in law enforcement would not align with their values.

All four public information officers interviewed in this research expressed concern regarding the future of policing. This concern was largely based around the need to restore community trust in police officers. As one officer reported, “I am [concerned], because [the] lean toward negative police stories makes it difficult to convince new, young officers to join the field. Law enforcement officers, in general, are good people who try to go out and do the right thing every day. A few bad apples [have] made it harder on everyone wearing the badge. It can be a very rewarding career, but the good stories have to be told.” When questioned further about these concerns, community based-policing tactics were suggested by two officers as a potential solution to restoring public trust in police officers.

Recent research in the field of criminal justice does indeed suggest a current lack of public trust in police officers (Pryce & Chenane, 2021). Previous research has shown consistent disparities in the levels of confidence and trust that the public has in the police (Goldsmith, 2005; Macdonald & Stokes, 2006; Tyler, 2005; van Craen & Skogan, 2014; Pryce & Chenane, 2021). A lack of trust between African Americans and police officers is of particular concern (Pryce & Chenane, 2021). Recent high-profile “police shooting incidents involving young Black individuals, such as George Floyd (Minneapolis, Minnesota), Breonna Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky), and Jacob Blake (Kenosha, Wisconsin), have increased the deep distrust, lack of confidence, and frustration that characterize the relationship between police and communities of color” (Pryce & Chenane, p. 809, 2021).

Increasing the public’s trust in police is generally agreed upon as essential for effective policing (Pryce & Chenane, 2021). As one participant in the current research noted, “the

partnerships growing in the community are going to have to increase...it's about just building those relationships and improving trust". Is community-based policing, however, the way to restore community trust in police officers? Community-based policing, a broad yet strategic approach to policing, generally refers to three central tenets: citizen involvement, decentralization, and problem-solving (Skogan & Williamson, 2008). The way in which these tenets are implemented varies between departments (Skogan & Williamson, 2008).

Existing research does offer support for community-based policing as one potential policing strategy to increase public trust, as well as to encourage cultural and structural change within police organizations (Greene, Bergman, & McLaughlin, 1994). Community policing tactics have also been linked with reduced crime rates and improved public confidence in policing (Oosthuizen, 2021). When the public is involved in the problem solving and priority setting of their local police department, their degree of confidence in the ability of the officers in their local departments increases (Oosthuizen, 2021).

Results from this research additionally suggest that the media influences student perceptions of policing as well as has influence over the way that public information officers operate in their roles. One way to view these results is through the lens of Agenda setting theory. Agenda setting theory, proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), states that the media plays a significant role in shaping reality. The media determines what issues are "important" enough for the public to hear about as well as has authority over the way that stories are framed to the public. Previous research on agenda setting theory in relation to policing, conducted by Fewes (2017), examined the negative portrayal of Michael Brown in the media after he was fatally shot by a police officer in 2014, for example. The results of the current study suggest that the media may shape student's opinions of the "reality" of policing, to some degree. As one student

reported, “I would say that it [my opinion of police officers] probably leans more negative at this time...I think subconsciously... it [the media’s portrayal of officers] influences all of us a little bit.”

Additional research suggests that the media may influence viewer’s attitudes on police misconduct and discrimination (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). In a study conducted by Kenneth Dowler and Valerie Zawilski in 2007, it was discovered that “heavy consumers of network news were more likely to believe that police misconduct was a frequent event...this was especially true for minority respondents” (Dowler & Zawilski, p. 1, 2007).

There are mixed opinions in existing research as to whether the police are presented negatively or positively in the media (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Eschholz et al., 2002). However, research has found that negative accounts of police behavior that are shared in the media “can create a...culture of distrust that...[reduces] police trustworthiness among citizens” (Pryce & Chenane, p. 809, 2021). In the present study, it is important to note that the majority of both students and public information officers felt that the media’s presentation of policing was mostly negative. The majority of both students and public information officers additionally felt that the media puts out stories that will “sell” best to the public, and that negatively framed stories are what best “sell”. As noted by one public information officer, “I wish there were more positive stories that went out about police, but I also know that the media is a business and also know that when a story runs...they know what kind of content drives their viewership.”

Additionally, the majority of both students and public information officers felt that the media did not tell the entire story when it comes to policing. As one student commented, “The main thing I see sometimes in the media that frustrates me is the lack of the full situation...it’s kind of like they take bits and pieces and then build their story...I would say sometimes they will

choose to select what's more sensational as opposed to completing the full story so it's hard to judge the character [of officers] fully." Interestingly, however, while many student participants seemed to discuss a lack of context or lack of "the entire story" when it came to the media's representation of the police, many students still demonstrated somewhat critical opinions of policing which they attributed to the content of the media that they view. As previously mentioned, the students who demonstrated the most critical viewpoints of officers were female participants.

In the present study, female students offered more critical opinions of police officers than male students. Current research on sex differences in student perceptions of policing is limited. One study, conducted by Diaz and Nuño (2021), however, examined factors related to the likelihood of women choosing to pursue careers as police officers. Results indicated that women, in general, were less likely than men to be interested in pursuing careers in law enforcement (Diaz & Nuño, 2021). For both men and women, "the likelihood [of] pursuing a career in policing was affected by a number of personal characteristics and the current socio-political climate" (Diaz & Nuño, p. 1, 2021). Additionally, current research on college students' perceptions of women in policing indicates that "male college students [believe] that women's roles within policing should be limited because women are not physically strong enough. A college education did not impact the beliefs that men held about female police officers" (Diaz & Nuño, p. 12, 2021; Austin & Hummer, 2000). Finally, in a survey of undergraduate students, women were found to believe that "female officers receive less respect from the community than male officers" (Diaz & Nuño, p. 12, 2021; Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018). These results may partially explain the findings of the current study.

Current research that may additionally explain the results of the present study, and focuses on women in policing, indicates that many women face barriers and discrimination while working as police officers. Female officers may “face resistance from male colleagues in the form of teasing, exclusion from social events, and being forced to perform roles deemed a ‘woman’s job’ ...even after assimilating into the police subculture, women are still subject to sexual harassment, unequal pay, hostility, and more” (Diaz & Nuño, p. 13, 2021; Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Alderen et al., 2017; Batton & Wright, 2018). If female criminal justice students are aware of these barriers to women in law enforcement, they may hold more scrutinous views of law enforcement compared to men.

Previous research has, additionally, examined sex differences in political opinions which may further explain the results of the current study. In general, it has been found that “women are more likely than men to hold liberal positions on a variety of issues... [according to] Social Role Theory, which purports that men and women inhabit different social roles (for example, women as caregivers, men as bread-winners) that then leads to opinion differences, because individuals are socialized to adopt the traits necessary for these roles. Such traits include anti-conflict and compassionate for women compared to assertive and tough for men” (Lizotte, p. 51, 2017).

Additional existing research has examined college student opinions on policing in general. Morrow, Vickovic, Dario, & Shjarback (2019) studied the “Ferguson Effect” and related public scrutiny on college students’ motivation to become police officers. The results of this study suggest that negative attention directed toward law enforcement has made college students apprehensive about pursuing careers in policing (Morrow et al., 2019). It is suggested that police departments try to mitigate negative perceptions in order to combat this (Morrow et al., 2019).

Another study, by Williams and Nofziger (2012), examined the perceptions that young adults living in a college town have of police officers. The results of this research suggest that being in college diminishes students' trust in police, and that students are two times more likely than general citizens to report feeling unsafe in the presence of police officers (Williams & Nofziger, 2012).

While there is currently not a large body of research on sex differences in student perceptions of police officers, the results of the present research suggest that they may exist. As one male student reported, "I think that a lot of the opinion [the current public opinion of officers] is unfair...I think a lot of [the time] ...officers [are] portrayed in a bad light... [based off of] the actions of the few." In contrast, one female student reported, "[I am inspired] to go into the field of criminal justice and to be an advocate for police reform and be an advocate for citizens everywhere, especially Black Americans, because they are so often mistreated by police officers [at] a disproportionate rate." As can be seen in this discrepancy, male participants appeared more willing to offer supportive comments of officers, whereas female participants appeared more willing to offer critical comments of officers when asked to provide their personal opinions. Further research should be conducted in this area to more directly examine differences in student opinions of policing based on sex.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight two previously underexamined topics in the field of criminal justice. First, investing in a college degree appears to deter students from considering careers in law enforcement. Much existing research in the past several decades has focused on the effects of education on police performance and promotion, with little attention given to education's effect on individuals' desire to pursue careers in law enforcement. Next, the results of this

research suggest that sex differences may exist in student perceptions of law enforcement. While prior research has investigated barriers to women in policing and public perceptions of women in policing, little attention has been given to differences in perceptions of law enforcement on the basis of sex.

While the results of this research offer valuable insight into the narratives surrounding policing, consideration of the limitations of this research is essential. Because this was a qualitative study with a small purposive convenience sample of both students and public information officers, results may not be generalizable to larger populations. Additionally, the potential influence of personal interviewer biases is more likely in qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research. Confirmation bias as well as wording or leading question bias are of concern in qualitative research. Additionally, respondent biases such as social desirability bias or acquiescence bias could potentially occur during participant interviews. Resources such as time and money were limited in this research as well. Funding was not provided for this research, and the time allotted to conduct interviews was limited from January 2022 to March 2022. The limitations of grounded theory are also important to consider within the context of the present study. One prominent criticism of grounded theory is that there are not widely standardized rules to follow when considering the identification of categories (Olesen, 2007).

Due to these limitations, it is recommended that further research on the narratives surrounding policing be conducted in order to further examine the topics and themes that emerged in the present study. Additionally, further research should be conducted on each topic, individually, to generate more in-depth knowledge on each topic as well as to consider potential solutions to problems that were revealed through these interviews. Finally, topics that should be given special attention in future research, due to a current lack of literature surrounding them, are

the impact of sex on the public's view of policing, as well as the possibility of a college degree acting as a deterrent to students who are considering police work as a career.

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APPENDIX A

Student Question List

1. How did you decide to major in criminal justice?
2. What is your opinion on the media's presentation of police officers?
3. What is your opinion on social media's presentation of hashtags and campaigns like “#blacklivesmatter”, #alllivesmatter, etc.?
4. Does what you see in the media influence your desire to either go into or not go into police work?
5. How has the decision to obtain a bachelor's degree impacted your career aspirations?
6. Is there anything else I haven't asked you already that you think I should know?

APPENDIX B

Public Information Officer Question List

1. How did you decide to become a public information officer?
2. What is your opinion on the media's presentation of police officers?
3. What is your opinion on social media's presentation of hashtags and campaigns like
"#blacklivesmatter", #alllivesmatter, etc.?
4. Do you have a college degree?
5. Are you concerned about the future of policing? Why or why not?
6. Is there anything else I haven't asked you already that you think I should know?