



## ‘There’s Gonna Be Bad Apples’: Police–Community Relations through the Lens of Media Exposure Among University Students

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### Abstract

Recently, increased media attention has been given to tensions between law enforcement officers and the communities they police. An individuals’ opinions of law enforcement agencies may be formed from various areas, including their exposure to various forms of media. Here, we are interested in the types of media students are exposed to (particularly social media, television news, crime-related television shows). Through interviews with undergraduate students, we seek to understand how both an individual’s demographic characteristics and their media consumption contribute to how perceptions are formed on issues related to violence perpetrated by law enforcement, as well as against law enforcement. Future studies can build on the initial findings and be conducted on a broader range of community members.

### Keywords

Public opinion; law enforcement; policing; media; race.

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## Introduction

Relationships between police officers and the communities they serve vary in levels of stress and cooperation. Whereas middle- and upper-class neighborhoods often have amicable relationships with their local law enforcement agencies, residents of inner cities are more likely to distrust or fear police officers. This effect is most strongly pronounced among the young, Black, male population (see Anderson 2000; Brunson 2007; Wacquant 2010).

News reports, once relegated to local communities, newspapers and television channels, have expanded to national news outlets and internet news, expanding the reach with social media and mobile applications (apps). With myriad tools available, the public can view news stories from around the world with similar ease as they can those in their own communities. However, the types and frequency of media exposure, along with individual demographic factors, may affect perceptions of criminal justice agencies. As Bloustein and Israel (2006) posit, 'the community does not, for the most part, get its information about crime and crime control from personal experience but from their engagement with the mass media' (as cited in Lee and McGovern 2014, 10). As such, media outlets have a prominent role in shaping individual opinions of law enforcement agencies.

Here, we are interested in understanding how university students perceive law enforcement and community interactions. With the influx of high-profile incidents being reported over the past several years, we explore how exposure to various media avenues plays a role in shaping attitudes. Specifically, we focus on how students who identify as White versus a person of colour may have varying views on violent interactions between law enforcement officers and community members.

## Problematic law enforcement encounters

In the absence of a reliable national dataset on civilians killed by law enforcement officers in the United States (US) (Comey 2015), Alpert (2015, 237–242) notes 'our best data are generated by the media, which has become our national watchdog on police behaviour, including use of force, deadly force, and pursuit driving'. For instance, the website Mapping Police Violence compiles data on violent incidents perpetrated by law enforcement. As of the time of writing, this website reports the police killed 646 people in the US in 2018, and 1,147 people in 2017. Many of these incidents occur during the commission of routine police work that escalate into violent incidents.

Problematic encounters between citizens and law enforcement officers often begin as traffic stops. Eith and Durose (2011) note that police force or threat of force is used in less than two per cent of contacts with the community (as cited in Nix et al. 2017). Engel and Calnon (2004) find the odds of Black or Hispanic drivers receiving a citation, being searched and being arrested are substantially greater than for White drivers; force was used in fewer stops involving White drivers than either Black or Hispanic drivers (as cited in Barak, Leighton and Cotton 2015). When considering civilians killed by police, Blacks are more than two times as likely to be unarmed as Whites are (Nix et al. 2017). Some scholars note that fatal shootings perpetrated by police against civilians are not more frequent than in prior years (Campbell, Nix and Maguire 2018), despite increased media attention. Others indicate that a failure to systematically track homicides perpetrated by law enforcement officers may be viewed as 'institutional racism in the criminal justice system' (Kappeler and Potter 2015, 277). Violence perpetrated by police officers has recently been more prominently featured in media reports. Accounts of violence perpetrated against police officers has also seemingly increased, although it is difficult to discern whether this is actually the case. Police-involved shootings have led to some believing there is a 'war on police' (Rasmussen 2015, as cited in Schouten and Brennan 2016, 610), although this is not reflected in the official numbers of officer fatalities. In the US, recent numbers indicate that in 2017, 46 officers were killed feloniously, a decrease from the 66 officers killed feloniously in 56 separate

incidents in 2016 (Federal Bureau of Investigations 2016, 2017). While the low number of fatalities may represent outlier years, they may be due to several factors, including better safety equipment, better training for officers or improved relationships between officers and communities (Hayes 2017).

The situations that present the greatest physical risk for officers are those in which there are weapons present (but no violent crime occurring) and robberies (Biere, Detar and Craun 2016). In their discussion of prior scholarship, Schouten and Brennan (2016) explain various reasons for violence against the police, including suicide by police pursuits (Mohandie, Meloy and Collins 2009), attempts to further criminal enterprises, planned acts of retaliation and extremist mission violence (Gruenewald, Dooley, Suttmoeller, Chermak and Freilich 2016).

Communities with the greatest discrepancies in resources between Black and White residents and higher levels of concentrated disadvantage experience greater numbers of violent incidents against police officers (Jacobs and Carmichael 2002; Kaminski and Jeffries 2003). Wilson (1987) discusses the idea of concentrated disadvantage by explaining the impact of individuals residing in impoverished neighborhoods. Effects include an inability to obtain or maintain legitimate employment, lack of opportunities for quality education and a greater likelihood for deviance and criminogenic activities (Sampson and Wilson 2003). Many recent incidents of both violence against police officers and violence perpetrated by police officers have occurred in communities with these characteristics. As tensions between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve sometimes escalate into violence, these incidents are portrayed by the media to the broader public.

### **Perceptions of issues: Racial discrepancies**

Differences in perceptions of law enforcement officers and policing agencies on a larger scale often differ based on racial factors. White citizens have been shown to base their perceptions of police on their personal contact experiences with law enforcement (Huebner, Schafer and Bynum 2004). As explained by Whitehead (2015, 136):

If police departments and scholars are indeed serious about addressing the role of race in policing, then paying attention to, understanding, and acknowledging racial nuance in even the most seemingly trivial aspects of police practice and talk must be a priority.

Cooperation from the public can be earned by law enforcement by exercising authority in a fair manner (Tyler 2005).

According to Tuch and Weitzer (1997):

1. Celebrated and well-publicised cases of police brutality and misconduct will have the greatest impact on citizen attitudes.
2. Although both Blacks and Whites may have a negative reaction to police brutality, Blacks have a more severe reaction.
3. Incidents that are well-publicised will shape perceptions and opinions for longer periods of time for Blacks and Latinos than for Whites.

These three points are all relevant to the current study. However, we would like to call attention to the third point. As news media is more readily available than in the past, stories of high-profile incidents are also more easily accessible. Further, as stories are consumed (whether through television news, internet news, social media posts or other avenues), those stories can continue to be retold and shared, particularly through social media.

## Technology and policing

Police agencies have become increasingly reliant on various forms of technology. In the US, for instance, dashboard cameras were introduced in the 1980s and became widespread by the early 2000s (Taylor et al. 2017). Body cameras have also become more widely used in policing agencies in the US and other nations. Although many view body cameras as a solution to an issue, some warn against relying on them because they represent incomplete representations of incidents (Kappeler and Potter 2015). As explained by Kindy et al. (2015), '[w]hile supervisors, prosecutors, jurors, and the public can examine every frame of the video, officers must make split-second decisions under pressure'" (as cited in Kappeler and Potter 2015, 309). Therefore, perceptions formed by the public through the use of technological tools may be based on scenarios that are not representative of decision-making processes occurring at the time of the events.

Police agencies use social media to 'bridge the divide' between themselves, the media and the public (Lee and McGovern 2014, 129). Interactions on social media between police and the media, as well as police and the public, can assist in reducing risks (Lee and McGovern 2016). Contrarily, social media may be used to generate negative stories regarding law enforcement and citizen interactions. Therefore, social media can serve multiple purposes for police agencies, both positive and negative from their perspective.

## High-profile incidents

Those who routinely view network news may be more inclined to believe police misconduct is more frequent than those who do not (Dowler and Zawilski 2007). Viewing more stories involving police misconduct increases the likelihood of viewers accepting this belief (Weitzer and Tuch 2004). Although television broadcasts once dominated the landscape of news reporting, recent data indicate a shift in how the US public consumes news coverage. The most frequently used sources for individual news gathering are now websites, apps and social media (Mitchell et al. 2017).

Individuals may be less likely to share stories about crime than they are other topics, such as science and technology (Bright 2016). Individuals further researching digital news stories they have read or observed, in general, is more common among Blacks than Whites (Lu 2017). It may be that Black social media users are more likely to post, share or comment on a story (Lu 2017), particularly if they are internalising events of members of the same racial group (Kochel 2017). Sharing, posting and commenting behaviours with respect to incidents involving strained relations between police officers and community members may be more common among those who feel most affected by these behaviours, such as racial and ethnic minorities.

Prior studies have explored public attitudes towards police after high-profile occurrences involving police violence (Weitzer 2002). After a high-profile law enforcement scandal in Indianapolis, media coverage seemed to have no significant impact on public attitudes towards police. However, it affected the perception of guilt the public had of the individual officers (Chermak, McGarrell and Gruenewald 2006). Further, race may be a greater factor in attitudes towards police after media exposure (Chermak, McGarrell and Gruenewald 2006). When examining calls for service after a high-profile incident in 2004, it was found that Black neighborhoods were significantly affected, placing fewer calls to report crime to police (Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016). In addition to the site of the incident, other locations were also affected by the reports of use of force:

It is one thing to disparage law enforcement in your thoughts and speech after an instance of police violence or corruption makes the news. It is quite another to

witness a crime, or even to be victimized, and refuse to report it (Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016, 870).

As such, it is of particular interest to note the impact that negative violent encounters may have and the salience of those effects.

### **Social media**

After high-profile incidents, changes in crime rates and/or policing efforts may occur. Davis (2015) and Lichtblau (2016) discuss the 'Ferguson effect', 'YouTube effect' or 'viral video effect': name variations on changes in policing efforts or crime fluctuations (as cited in Nix and Pickett 2017, 24). One study found those most likely to offend post-Ferguson were Black individuals residing in lower-income neighborhoods (Pyooz et al. 2016). While excessive force is not a modern phenomenon, news of incidents disseminates quickly through social media (Nix and Pickett 2017).

For instance, the use of Twitter in understanding the events of Ferguson is illustrative. In discussing the role social media platforms can have, Twitter 'was dichotomous in nature: on one hand scalding the reputation of Ferguson and its residents and on the other, allowing citizens to share their feeling of public distrust and public officials' (Moody-Ramirez et al. 2016, 62). Moreover, members of the public may categorise issues involving violence and law enforcement in one of the following ways: pertaining to race or racism, either at the structural or cultural level (Clark, Bland and Livingston 2017; Pitman et al. 2017), police mistrust (Clark et al. 2017) or individual blame against law enforcement officers (Pitman et al. 2017).

Media portraying law enforcement as negative agents may have a negative influence on the audience. Social media can act as a form of contagion among members of the public (Bejan, Hickman, Parkin and Pozo 2018). Once community members are exposed to and process these messages, negative results for law enforcement and community interactions may include increased strain, injuries or fatalities. It is to be expected that as incidents occur they will gain traction through social media exposure. This 'social media contagion' also allows individuals to witness controversial interactions between citizens and police, sometimes as captured by citizens on their individual smartphones or other recording devices (Shjarback et al. 2017, 43). When coupled with other forms of crime-based media, such as television shows, some individuals are immersed in crime-focused media.

### **Crime-based television shows**

Perceptions of the criminal justice system are also formed by viewing non-news-based television shows. Images of law enforcement in the media have become more prevalent, including factual and fictional depictions (Lee and McGovern 2014). Modern television programs perpetuate the image of an emphasis on criminal rights being triumphant over victim rights, as well as highly advanced technology and investigation techniques being at the disposal of police departments (Kappeler and Potter 2018). Reality-based policing shows 'construct a reality in which the most typical police crime fighting events are white police battling nonwhite criminals while protecting white victims' (Surette 2015, 109–110). Exposure to crime shows and documentaries may be correlated with an individual's perceptions of the necessity of use of police force (Donovan and Klahm 2015).

The 'good cop' and 'bad cop' motifs provide viewers with a 'schizophrenic' media construction of officers (Surette 2015, 100). Police officers are often not shown making human errors or engaging in daily decision-making processes in fictionalised accounts. On reality-based crime television shows, some controversial police behaviours, including racial profiling, may be portrayed as justified and acceptable (Prosise and Johnson 2009). On observational documentary style shows

focused on policing, the most common operational procedures shown to audiences include investigations, control, patrol and drug investigations. Arrests and questioning also comprise a reasonable proportion of incidents shown (Lee and McGovern 2014). The way media constructs incidents surrounding police conduct helps shape the public's attitude about societal issues (Graziano, Schuck and Martin 2009), even in fictionalised settings. Most viewers also indicate that activities shown in law enforcement observational documentaries are representative of policing activities (Lee and McGovern 2014).

### **University-based research on attitudes towards police**

In university settings, individuals can reflect on current and past events, providing the opportunity to discuss events both in and out of the classroom with professors and peers. Prior research indicates students have varying views on police and community relationships, based on individual characteristics. In general, minorities have been found to hold negative opinions of police (Fedorek 2015). White students are more likely to base their opinions on personal experiences, while Black students are more likely to base their judgements of treatment by police on the education they receive on policing issues (Hawk-Tourtelot and Bradley 2012). Mbuba (2010) found that among university students, race is the strongest predictor of attitudes held towards law enforcement.

Researchers have studied the impact of crime television shows on issues such as enrolment and major choice (see Barthe, Leone and Lateano 2013). Television crime shows also influence student perceptions on issues within the criminal justice system, such as guilt or innocence of the accused, freeing defendants on technicalities and offence clearance rates (Barthe Leone and Lateano 2013). As such, student perceptions can be examined on myriad issues to understand implications in criminal justice responses.

Personal experiences also play a role in opinions of police. Those who have experience as an employee, intern, or live with an employee of the criminal justice system, indicate more favourable opinions towards criminal justice employees (Fedorek 2015). Individuals frame their opinions and beliefs on the complete picture they assemble from their personal experiences and various media depictions.

### **Current study**

An individual's perceptions may be partially formed by the media to which they are exposed. We are interested in considering how the demographics of individuals, and the type of media exposure to which they are exposed, affects student attitudes towards police. Recent research explores how media exposure influences individual perceptions on crime and justice (Intravia, Wolff and Piquero 2017). Here, we build on this important body of work by adding qualitative discussion, allowing respondents to discuss policing incidents, and address specific news and social media platforms that may contribute to their perceptions of police and community interactions. As explained by Milivojevic and McGovern (2014, 34), 'social media's capacity for agenda building and its ability to stir the attention of both the traditional media and policy makers is an exceptionally under researched area that requires careful and rigorous criminological investigation'. A qualitative approach can explore the nuances by interviewing respondents about their specific viewing habits, allowing for additional insights on how media habits are correlated with perceptions of violence between law enforcement and community members.

According to Chong and Druckman (2007, 108), 'repeated exposure to a frame in communication thus induces frequent processing, which in turn increases the accessibility of the frame'. They argue that these frames exert greater influence when they are available, accessible and applicable. We analysed the interviews using a critical lens of media-viewing activities towards perceptions of police and community engagement. Pervasive depictions of either positive or negative policing

have been shown to affect public opinion (Surette 2015). Media construction of violence against and by law enforcement officers in news accounts may be even more salient in opinion formation, especially for individuals frequently exposed to multiple avenues of internet, television and social media news.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for additional prompting of questions, though most subjects did not need additional prompting. Subjects signed informed consent forms, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed by one of the researchers. The principal researcher was present for all interviews, and all interviews were conducted by either the principal researcher or co-researcher, following the scripted interview questions. All interviews were conducted in the principal researcher's work office and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. Institutional Review Board approval was received for this study.

All subjects were undergraduate students enrolled at a public higher education institution in the northwest region of the US. The final sample (n = 41) includes students recruited from various first-year level courses (including Introduction to Sociology, Introduction to US History, and Integrated Seminar, a first-year level critical thinking course), as well as from word-of-mouth recruitment from the student population.<sup>1</sup> The final sample comprised 20 males and 21 females; 19 freshmen, seven sophomores, eight juniors and seven seniors. Other characteristics are included in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Age distribution**

<i>Age</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Number</i>
18	8	23	3
19	7	24	1
20	6	26	1
21	9	29	1
22	4	33	1

**Table 2: Race and Ethnicity**

<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number</i>
White	35
Black	2
Native American	2
Mexican	1
Asian	3
Multiple Races	2
Hispanic	5
Non-Hispanic	36

In addition to demographic variables, we include whether students have taken a number of sociology courses or are more geared towards sociological perspectives through a sociology major or minor, as well as a substantial number of sociology-focused courses (indicated by sociology or non-sociology). We also capture various measures on media exposure, including questions on crime television shows, documentaries, television news, internet news and social media usage in Tables 3–5.

**Table 3: Crime Television Shows Watched**

<i>Title</i>	<i>Number</i>
Do not watch any crime related shows	13
Law and Order/Law and Order SVU	11
NCIS	9
CSI	8

<b>Criminal Minds</b>	6
<b>Blue Bloods</b>	3
<b>Lie to Me</b>	2
<b>Various Crime Documentaries (None Specified)</b>	2
<b>Blue Collar; Bones; Breaking Bad; Cold Case; Daredevil; Dexter; Hap and Leonard; How to Get Away with Murder; Justice Channel (Various Shows) Marvel TV Shows; OJ Simpson Documentary; Person of Interest; Psych; Revenge; Southland; Suits; To Catch a Predator</b>	1

**Table 4: Television and Internet News Viewing Frequency**

<i>Frequency of News Viewing</i>	<i>Television Based</i>	<i>Internet Based</i>
<b>Never</b>	7	0
<b>Not Often</b>	17	4
<b>Only when home</b>	2	0
<b>Few times per month</b>	0	1
<b>Once a week</b>	8	2
<b>More than once a week</b>	2	10
<b>Once a day</b>	5	21
<b>Multiple times a day</b>	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>

**Table 5: Social Media Platforms**

<i>Social Media</i>	<i>Facebook</i>	<i>Instagram</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>YouTube</i>	<i>Tumblr</i>	<i>Snapchat</i>	<i>LinkedIn</i>
<b>Active # of users</b>	33	25	12	25	2	14	4

**Findings**

Several relevant themes emerged after completion of the interviews. Many relate to issues with credibility of media and frequency of reporting or elaborate on issues with the framing of media experiences and how they shape individual perceptions. Some use specific examples of news events to illustrate or clarify their points; several discuss the Black Lives Matter movement as a turning point in these relationships. Others discuss issues with trust in police.

Responses have been categorised according to the levels of exposure to various media outlets. Here, we classify those who frequently engage with internet news as those who engage once per week or more with internet news. Television news is similarly classified as frequent if it is once a week or more frequently. Multiple social media account users are those with more than one active social media account. Multiple crime-based television shows include those with more than one of which they are a regular viewer.

***Frequent internet news***

Respondents in this group indicated frequent internet news exposure, but watch little to no television news, zero or one crime-based television shows, and have one or fewer active social media accounts:

I think that there are bad people in each role in life, and so I think that the majority of officers are out trying to take care of their community. But like, the one person that uses excessive force, or the two, those are the ones that get put into the light. It's kind of like with Black Lives Matter, the minority of people that do violent crimes while they're protesting, is not the majority of people that are trying to stand up for Black Lives Matter. (Female, 33, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)



(violence against the police) I think if they let it keep growing at the rate it's going, it will become a problem, because there's a lot of groups now that are blaming the police, when they're just the people that are carrying out what they're told to do, where their anger should be more aimed towards people that make the laws, I feel. I mean of course they can always mess up when they're trying to execute these laws out. (Male, 21, White, non-Hispanic, junior, non-sociology)

Both these excerpts indicate a belief that concerns are misplaced. Whether concerns centre on a small minority of officers who do not engage in unethical or illegal activity, or groups that blame policing agencies at large, both respondents believe that most officers do not engage in unlawful behaviours:

I worked in [city] and moved up here in the last six months, so I was friends with the officers that were shot and killed, and so a lot of that goes on down there with brutality, and also with officers being taken on. (Female, 33, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

In addition to internet news exposure, this particular respondent also had personal connections with law enforcement officers, resulting in personally felt effects of fatal violence against police officers. All three excerpts were provided by individuals who frequently consume internet news, but report no other substantial news or crime media exposure.

### ***Multiple social media accounts***

Respondents categorised here include those actively engaged in multiple forms of social media, but not regular consumers of multiple crime-based television shows, television news or internet news:

It [does] not happened frequently, this is an individual case, and if it does happen, just because maybe, like, the problem of the police, not about a citizen, about a regime they have, like the system is okay, just the individual having some problems. (Male, 18, Asian, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

If it bleeds it leads, so obviously I think those stories are going to be more pushed to the top of the line, so people are going to see it more, and think it's maybe a bigger issue than it actually is. (Male, 23, White, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

With respect to violence against the police:

[C]oming from someone who doesn't follow the news super closely or use a whole lot of social media, the stuff that I have seen does tend to be violent, but take it with a grain of salt. So, I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but I don't think it happens as frequently as people think because if it's always in your face, you're bound to think that it happens more often than it actually does. (Male, 23, White, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

Both these respondents indicated that there is not a widespread systemic issue with violence perpetrated by the police. The first discussed specifically that this is an individualised problem, while the second respondent alluded to media portrayals being more focused on particular incidents. With social media being their primary media outlet, they seemed concerned about the media framing issues focused on particular cases.

### ***Frequent television news viewing***

Respondents classified here include those who view television news regularly (at least once a week), but only maintain one active social media account, and do not consume substantial internet news or crime television:

It depends on the mood of the country, is how often we'll see it. I believe last year we saw incident after incident of police brutality, and I'm aware that it happens all the time, and it isn't always brought to light. But at the same time, how many people are in the United States, and how many law enforcement are there in the United States? The odds of it happening to me, I have no problem with law enforcement, but happening to someone like on this campus are probably minimal. It's feasible that it does happen in [local city] but on the scale of the United States, it could be a lot worse than it is. (Male, 24, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

There was the one in I think Texas last year, where there were like three killed, three officers I think, right after they were doing a protest about y'know, everyone was going, 'we hate the police, they're doing horrible things', and then immediately there's a gunshot and immediately everyone's cowering behind the police, the people they were just yelling at. So, to answer the question, it doesn't happen that often, and it's a real tragedy when it does, because these are the people that stand up against the people that no one else wants to have to deal with, and then no matter what they do, they're wrong, in the option of the uneducated populous, and then all of a sudden, they're the bad guy. (Male, 24, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

[I]t all comes down to the mentality and the training of the police, and how much we're asking them to deal with. We're asking them to deal with, say, there's someone who is autistic who is hurting themselves and we need someone to make them stop, who do we call, the police, okay someone has a gun and they're robbing a bank, who do we call, the police. Okay there's a fire, we call the fire department and also the police show up. They have too many tasks for their department, and the training is just, there's so much for them to have to deal with, they can't deal with all of it and stay mentally sane. It's a lot we're asking the police. (Male, 24, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

From the perspective of these White males, who garner most of their news from television, police may indeed engage in violence against citizens and they also have violence perpetrated against them by citizens. These excerpts demonstrate that they believe it is related to training, resources or perceptions of the uneducated masses. Only watching television news, in the absence of any other news, may limit the amount and type of coverage to which they are exposed.

### ***Frequent internet news and multiple social media accounts***

Respondents in this group had multiple active social media accounts and viewed internet news on a regular basis (at least once a week). However, they reported minimal exposure to television news and watched little to no crime-based television shows:

It's [violence against the police] probably less publicised than it actually happens, but I think it happens just as much as police brutality against other people, it's just not publicised nearly as much. (Female, 18, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

I don't necessarily think that it's a big problem, I mean, obviously it's an issue, but I think that because technology is so advanced and because individuals have much more access to the media and the media kinda, like they're framing what we want to see, so I don't necessarily think that it's occurring more as much as that it's out there more. The media's producing more of it, more of that type of news. (Male, 20, Black/multiple race, Hispanic, senior, sociology)

[W]ell, I've heard this a lot and thus have come to believe that it stays out of the news, and so even though I'm hearing about it less, I still have this feeling that it's going on like behind the public's back. I do get a vibe that things are better than they have been, just because there's a lot of, I don't know, it seems like my experiences with police are all positive. That's only with [local city] Police Department, I don't think I've ever been pulled over anywhere else, or stopped, or talked to a cop, or elsewhere other than [local city], and there's a lot of stories being circulated about the good cop and stuff lately, and I think that's kind of to combat this whole police brutality publicity, which has become so major lately. It does cause me to feel like things are getting better, whether that's true or not. (Male, 20, White, non-Hispanic, junior, non-sociology)

I think that a lot of people do just take what they see on the media and they don't go any further. I think the only reason I go any further is because I took a journalism class, and even then, I probably don't fully understand the entire story. I think that's something to consider for everybody. (Female, 20, White/Asian, Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

These individuals note that exposure to stories is a factor of what is reported in the news, as well as an individual's willingness to further explore news stories. These quotations are from those who engage with internet news and social media, but not other media avenues. As such, these individuals may be more comfortable with internet news:

I kind of came to this conclusion that they could do a better job of doing psych evaluations on police but then they could also do a better job at sifting through who has actually had violence committed against them by cops and who's just pulling a card to get out of a quick punishment. (Male, 29, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

People have been getting very political, and so at protests, or even just seeing a cop driving down the street, people will throw stuff at them or attack them ... People are intentionally attacking cops just because they are law enforcement, so I think that would be a more serious problem than cops using excessive force or injuring others. (Female, 18, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

I have a brother-in-law who's a police officer, and he switched because he's down in [state] and there's a lot of gang violence towards police, police and fireman actually, it's a big, what he was saying is, it's kind of like an initiation thing almost, so that's a pretty big concern if people are targeting police or firefighters like a way to get accepted into something. (Female, 29, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

These three excerpts provided by White respondents indicate concern for officers and/or diffuse responsibility from those who may have engaged in violence (e.g., 'pulling a card' versus better evaluations for officers). Certainly, the third excerpt, from an individual with a family member who is an officer, is personally connected to the issue:

In my sociology class, we just talked about Black Lives Matter, and I think that everyone's talking about it, especially how many deaths African Americans have had under policemen. I think it's just becoming a bigger problem. (Female, 19, Mexican, Hispanic, sophomore, sociology)

I think just like from what I've been exposed to, with all the protests lately, like the Black Lives Matter movement, I feel like it's brought a lot more attention to how people are mistreated. But that doesn't mean that there's nothing happening to police officers, I just see in most cases how horribly people are treated. (Female, 20, White/Asian, Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

Although Black Lives Matter was not specifically addressed in the interview questions, several respondents discussed this in their answer. As illustrated by these excerpts, Black Lives Matter has become representative for some as an iconic social justice movement. This may be more likely to resonate with people of colour, as the two respondents above both identify as Hispanic.

***Multiple social media accounts, frequent television news viewing, internet news and multiple crime-based television shows***

Respondents in this group are those with generally high levels of media exposure. They regularly view crime-based television shows, engage regularly with multiple social media platforms, and watch both television and internet news at least once per week. The following excerpts demonstrate how this respondent views differences in violence perpetrated by, as well as against, law enforcement officers:

I don't think that it's a huge problem right now. I think that the way that media spins it [police brutality] off to be is a bigger problem. I've taken a policing class, and so we look into, there are definitely a lot of cases where police brutality does exist, but I think it's more the way the public is perceiving their actions, even though their actions fall in like their code of conduct and what they're supposed to do. But I don't think that it's a huge problem right now. (Female, 22, White, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

I think it has the potential to become more of a problem. Definitely the way that the media portrays the police I think is a big factor in contributing to brutality against the police or like police deaths. So I could definitely see it rising throughout the years. (Female, 22, White, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

As a White female student with some form of sociological focus in her studies, her lens seems to be one that acknowledges the existence of both forms of violence. The second excerpt is indicative of her concern over potential future increases in law enforcement deaths, whereas the first contains a justification for some of the conduct that has been classified as brutality:

Recently, I haven't seen a whole lot of stuff, but there was like the whole riots in Ferguson, over that one guy who got shot. And then there was the Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown. (Male, 23, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

[S]o like a lot of people say that in Chicago, they target a specific race, like they specifically target Blacks. I don't necessarily think that, because the majority of the population there is Black, so if you look at the ratio of Black and White it's probably going to be the same, in the people that are arrested, like the ratio is probably gonna be about the same. But like, police brutality, in like South and North Dakota with the North Dakota Access Pipeline, they're not armed, they're not like fighting

the police, but they're like shooting their arms off, so yeah. (Female, 19, Native American/White, non-Hispanic, freshman, sociology)

In Dallas, when nine police officers were gunned down, and then I saw another one I think it was in New York where a police officer was sitting in her squad car and somebody came up and executed her. You're safe nowhere I guess if you're a police officer. (Male, 23, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, sociology)

It's kind of like you're a soldier or marine in Iraq, anyone could be the enemy—anyone could just run up and kill you—like the woman who got shot in the back of the head in her police car. I'd be extremely concerned. But the media doesn't care so much about police officers getting killed as it cares about low-income minorities getting killed by the police. I don't think it's made as big of a deal—which it should be. You shouldn't kill cops, they're peacekeepers for the most part. (Male, 23, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, sociology)

All of the above respondents recalled specific incidents from recent years. For instance, the stories about Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, protests and violence at the North Dakota Access Pipeline, and the shooting of a female police officer. All these participants are actively involved with various media and crime and news outlets. Perhaps these individuals identify with the victims of reported police misconduct and violence and/or the police officers who are victimised, with perceptions being reinforced through various media avenues:

I think definitely since the Black Lives Matter movement, I think that's like what fumed it from the beginning ... Now police brutality—the police feel threatened because they feel like the people are out to get them, and also the people feel threatened because they feel like the police are out to get them instead of making them feel safe. (Female, 18, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

Both these excerpts, from the same respondent, discuss a general distrust of police. As someone exposed to multiple avenues of news and crime-based information, she is likely immersed in news about incidents she finds concerning. She also raised this as potentially being a generational issue:

I would just say as like a whole, like as my generation, all of us feel as if the police aren't looking out for us. I kind of feel like you're supposed to drive by a cop car and feel kind of safe, protected, and every time I drive by a cop car, I like jump and like get two hands on the wheel, sit up straight, so I feel like the police kinda are making it feel like they're out to get us, and not protect us. (Female, 18, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

With any organisation as large as police forces are, there's gonna be bad apples. There's gonna be onesies and twosies that are doing the right thing. But like, if you are a police officer, you did it for a specific reason. Either you didn't agree with the way policing in your community went, or you wanted to make a difference in your community and keep it safe. I don't think a whole lot of people join the police—I mean, there's definitely probably some—I mean, if you get enough people together there's gonna be the weird ones that sign up for the police force to shoot people and beat them for no reason. I think it's a problem that it exists, but I don't think it's as widespread as the media portrays it. Because it'll be like one incidence that gets blown up, and now everybody's videotaping cops, everything they do. (Male, 23, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, sociology)

This participant seemed dismissive of ideals regarding the authoritative policing personality, which has historically been problematic in law enforcement. He also referenced the 'bad apple' theory, which relies on removing the anomalous officers engaging in corruption and violence. The idea here is that once the isolated bad apples are removed, it prevents corruption from spreading to other officers. However, because these are often systemic issues rather than isolated incidents, simply removing the bad apple often does not alleviate the issue (Caless 2008).

### ***Multiple social media accounts, frequent internet news and multiple crime-based television shows***

Respondents in this section engage with multiple social media platforms and internet news at least once per week. Further, they watch multiple crime-based television shows:

Like every other day I see police have shot someone unarmed or brutalised someone, so it is, it's not a new problem because like it's been something that's been happening since like Rodney King for example, but now we just have more access with like technology and media and so that we can see it more often, but like I wouldn't say that there's been like an increase. I think it's been pretty consistent. (Female, 22, Black, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

Often [how often she sees incidents of police violence]. Just because of like who I follow. (Female, 22, Black, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

Both excerpts from the same respondent indicate that she believes it is not an increase in the number of incidents; rather, it is an increase in the amount of media coverage incidents focused on violence perpetrated by the police is given. In her second excerpt, she illustrated that her exposure to these incidents was based on her social media experiences. Similarly, the following quotation indicates that a great deal of these participants' news exposure is based on their social media activity:

A lot of the social media and news for me is connected because it is based off somebody posting, oh I can't believe this happened, and then I go and look it up. I'm not very good at being proactive of just reading the news or going out of my way for it. Every once in a while, I'll go, 'hey what's going on', but for the most part I need something to trigger, 'this is going on' for me to look it up. (Male, 21, White, non-Hispanic, junior, non-sociology)

... When I was a kid, it wasn't White cop shot, Black male such and such, it was, officer shot, so and so, here's the reason why, and I think that adding that race card to incidents kinda plays a big role, too. But yeah, it kinda goes back to, y'know, abusing power, and people not fully understanding or getting all of the facts of a situation. They might see, White cop shot a Black male, or whatever the scenario is, but they don't see, did he comply? Did he pull a gun on the officer? What's the background to it, does this person have a history of violence with law enforcement? (Male, 26, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, sociology)

I feel like it's [police brutality] something we should pay attention to and look at, but I believe that a lot of the stories on the news when that was big were very snipped, and so reading the full story, a lot of the time the police officer did have a justified reason. Not all of them; there were some pretty bad ones. But I feel like it's not as big of an issue as it was seen to be. Like I trust the police, it's their job. (Male, 21, White, non-Hispanic, junior, non-sociology)

I think what a lot of people don't understand is when an officer tells you to stop, that at that moment, that is law, that power can be abused at the same time, but if you're asked to stop and just complied, I think that brutality rate's gonna drop if you're simply doing what you're asked. It's kind of a double-edged sword, because I mean it could be as simple as just complying, but then they could also abuse it, too. So I mean it's kinda a catch 22. (Male, 26, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, sociology)

These respondents discussed belief in justification of law enforcement behaviours. These excerpts focus on issues related to a lack of compliance and the way the ultimate story is shaped by the media.

### ***Multiple social media accounts and multiple crime-based television shows***

Respondents in this group engage with multiple social media accounts and crime-based television shows, but no substantial internet or television-based news:

I saw a lot of it on Facebook, but it seemed very, I don't know, I guess I saw a lot of it, but I saw a lot of two sides of the story, and I couldn't really piece out which one was more true. They just never seemed really true to me. They just seemed very exaggerated what the case was or they didn't have all the facts and they were making these really grand accusations about different things. I say I'd see it a lot, but I don't think it's credible. (Female, 22, White, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

I feel like the police enforcing has increased in their violence towards some people, and it totally varies on the situation because everyone is different and it's really hard to decide or determine who is in the wrong necessarily in some of those things, because you don't know if someone is doing it because of a racial issue ... you really can't tell unless you really know the person, and so it really goes by the situation. But at the same time, it goes for the same for someone going against the police trying to do their job and people can take that completely out of proportion, because they are maybe Black and they got pulled over, they might assume that it is because they're Black, but they really were speeding and the police officer is just doing their job. (Female, 20, White, non-Hispanic, sophomore, non-sociology)

I think that it gets blown out of proportion a lot. I think that the story isn't being told truthfully, and so people make these opinions on half the facts ... there are some that are issues, but I also think that it's hard being an officer, and I think that anything you do will be critiqued and ridiculed by the public if it's videotaped or talked about and if it's a big case, then I think that people just kinda wanna see one side of it, whatever fits their perception, they're gonna go with what that is for them. (Female, 22, White, non-Hispanic, senior, sociology)

These quotations are from White, non-Hispanic females. They question the credibility, proportionality and truthfulness of the accounts. Perhaps these beliefs are held because of a lack of exposure to multiple forms of news, as much of the news they gather may be from social media.

### ***Frequent internet news and multiple crime-based television shows***

Respondents in this section viewer multiple crime-based television shows and engage in internet news frequently. There is no substantial television news viewing or social media engagement:

I believe that people who think it's a huge deal and are posting about it all the time on Facebook, I think that they have some different agenda against police or the

authority. I don't see it from what I've seen as a huge concern, so no. (Female, 19, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

Interestingly, the quotation referencing Facebook is by a respondent who claimed to have minimal social media activity. Although she watches internet news daily, she does not view television news. She may be consuming internet news from sources not reporting events involving in police related violence.

***Frequent television news viewing, frequent internet news and multiple social media accounts***

Respondents in this category are actively engaged with multiple social media accounts and frequently watch television and internet news, but minimal crime-based television programs:

There have definitely been incidents regarding police brutality that have baffled me. Social media definitely posts a lot of videos of like cop cams, and like different angles of like, shootings, probably the one that got to me the most was the young boy in the park who the police officer pulled the car up to him and shot him within like 11 seconds, which was pretty crazy. (Male, 21, Native American/White, non-Hispanic, junior, non-Sociology)

It has been lately. With like the Texas shooting and stuff like that [on violence against the police being problematic]. Male, 19, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

[R]ight before I came here actually I got a notification saying that there was an officer killed in Paris, so pretty often for that too. (Female, 18, White, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

These three participants recalled at least one specific incident as part of their interview. The first, who also discussed the use of surveillance technology, recalled a specific incident in which an officer shot a civilian. The other two discussed incidents involving violence against law enforcement officers:

I mean there's obviously a racial factor still in our country that we're dealing with, and a lot of it does have to deal with that. And just obviously bad publicity for the police, and also movements like Black Lives Matter just kind of butting heads all the time, and obviously we're such a polarised country too, that it's kind of just people's ideals are hitting against each other, and it's kind of, the media's playing a big part of it and sharing a lot more of it than we're used to seeing. (Male, 22, White, non-Hispanic, senior, non-sociology)

This respondent discussed issues related to polarisation among members of the public and how this plays out in the media. He seemed to fault the media for the dissention between groups and pointed to media effects on relations between law enforcement and community members:

[I]t's difficult with how much interaction the police have with people to not have at least some incidences, and now pretty much every police officer has either dash cam on them or the jacket cameras, so we're seeing a lot more, we actually have proof of it, whereas in the past they might have just swept it under the table. So now we're actually like seeing the things that they do every time that they do it. (Male, 20, White, non-Hispanic, sophomore, non-sociology)



This excerpt indicates a specific trust in technology and that technology is used to help build and maintain trust with the community. Further, this respondent trusts the process of accurately recorded and disseminated issues related to misconduct towards the public.

### ***Frequent television news viewing and frequent internet news***

Respondents in this category are exposed to the news through both television and internet, but do not have multiple active social media accounts or watch crime-based television shows:

I think I can take the example of the United Airlines, so I think in the news reports, they pay attention, for the first period, they were paying attention to the passenger's race, and then they just attacked, they just put their anger on the police, because they can't defend like, because of their race, and he's Korean, he's a doctor, so I think people will use these factors against police, but before the truth comes out, I think people will pay attention to the native side of police. So, whether they [commit] misconduct or not, they will think the police are wrong. (Male, 18, Asian, non-Hispanic, freshman, non-sociology)

### ***No substantial media exposure***

Respondents in this category have no substantial media exposure, indicating no crime-based television shows, no significant news exposure (through television or internet) and no major social media usage:

It seems like in the different things I've heard, I don't know if people are kind of celebrating that, it just seems like it can get scary if we're no longer trusting the people that are supposed to be keeping us safe. (Female, 20, multiple race, non-Hispanic, sophomore, non-sociology)

As the only excerpted interview included with no substantial exposure to media, this quotation is an anomaly. She seemed to have a two-fold concern in this discussion: 'celebrating' violence against police officers, as well as a lack of trust in law enforcement.

## **Discussion**

Regardless of whether the dynamics focus on violence perpetrated against law enforcement officers or by law enforcement officers, and regardless of the venues through which individuals consume news, media plays at least some role in shaping perceptions and attitudes about crime and justice (Crichlow and Fulcher 2017; Ericson 1991). Greer and McLaughlin (2011, 27) term the extreme instances of this as 'trial by media'. Not only does news media serve 'as a proxy for public opinion', but 'due process and journalistic objectivity can give way to sensationalist, moralizing speculation about the actions and motives of those who stand accused in the media spotlight'. As such, it is expected that in the most egregious or extreme cases, the public will make judgements and potentially influence policy based on the media stories they consume.

A relatively small number of those interviewed indicated regular viewing of television news, with most relying heavily on internet-based news as their primary source of news. Of particular note is that almost all the accounts that provide specific examples of events (both of police brutality and violent acts perpetrated against police) were provided by viewers of television news. Frequency of viewing may be daily, a few times per week, or once per week. While this may be indicative of individuals who are simply more interested and engaged in current events, it may also be that television news offers different experiences to its audience, allowing individuals to recall details of stories more readily.

Surveillance, combined with the power to personally editorialise and share new stories, is illustrated by the flurry of activity on Twitter with respect to Ferguson. During the first week of protests, there were more than 3.6 million posts about Ferguson. By the end of the month, that number had increased to eight million (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). The public now has more tools to disseminate information about their personal experiences with law enforcement.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study is not without its limitations, most notably, the small sample size and restriction to university students. The sample was drawn from a university heavily populated with White students; as such, there are fewer students in the sample identifying as belonging to a racial and/or ethnic minority group. As such, the researchers note that the 'White gaze' is the primary focus of the current investigation. However, it is of interest that many individuals in this study were relatively heavy social media users and interested in current events involving police and community relationships. We hope to use this research as a starting point for future studies and expect to expand the sample to more diverse populations, including those in the general community.

Prior research has found that attitudes towards issues such as crime, offenders and punishment are grounded most deeply in political ideology (see Roche, Pickett and Gertz 2015). It may be that political ideology is correlated with other factors here, such as social media behaviour or news viewing habits. This question was not factored into the current analysis, but should be considered in future studies.

As discussed throughout, many respondents acknowledged that there are issues between police officers and community members in the US and abroad. Some specifically discussed the lack of tension in the local community. Regardless of the quality of relationships between police and members of the community, the publicity surrounding the issues in policing may have long-term and nationwide effects on public confidence and trust (Weitzer 2015). Moreover, since the tenor of mainstream news media focuses on a crime perspective (Crichlow and Fulcher 2017), the messages conveyed to the public may be retributive and justice-oriented. The extent to which the news stories contribute to ongoing tensions between inner-city minorities and police remains to be explored.

Gabbidon and Higgins (2008, 110) discuss the impact of negative encounters with the police. Blacks 'vicariously experience negative encounters' that may occur through direct witness accounts or high-profile incidents. Whites are less likely to have these encounters and may be less likely to hold negative views. However, as media exposure to negative incidents spreads, we may observe a stronger impact on White individuals who may previously have not been exposed to these incidents. As illustrated by these findings, respondents with family members in law enforcement-related fields may be unaffected by the spread of media information. Moreover, the comments derived from respondents with law enforcement family and friends were primarily from White respondents. When discussing violence in particular 'as a threat to the moral and social order, it becomes fearful even to the persons who live in relatively safe circumstances and have no personal experiences with crime' (McIntyre 1967, 46). Despite the relatively low crime rates (and certainly infrequent incidents of violent crime) in the local community, many of the subjects here are still affected by violent events elsewhere.

### **Conclusion**

The interviews are illustrative of both the immediacy and persistence of the impact of current events. During the interviews, many participants recalled events from the past few years, as well as those currently unfolding. Decades ago, these stories likely would have had less of an impact on these individuals because the communities they live in may not have been as deeply affected

by these events. With the immersion of social media, internet news and, to some extent, television and print news, the location of events becomes less of a factor in framing opinions of law enforcement and the community members they police. As the reach of the media extends, so too does its impact on developing the lens through which individuals view their world.

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<sup>1</sup> The researchers did not initially offer any form of incentive for participation in the study, but one professor opted to offer participation in the study as a replacement quiz grade in their individual courses.

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