

2019


# Media Coverage of Law Enforcement and Effects of the Image Created

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Media Coverage of Law Enforcement And Effects of the Image Created

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree in  
Bachelors of Arts in Communications and Media Studies  
School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences  
Thesis Advisors: John Duvall, Second Reader: Bradley VanAlstyne

Dominican University of California  
San Rafael, California  
May, 2019

## Media Coverage of Police 2

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the undergraduate program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Department of Communications and Media Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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### Abstract

This paper examines a number of case studies and articles concerning media's depiction of law enforcement and its effects on the officers' duties to the public. Recent stories of excessive use of force by police throughout the country began a new generation of activists for civil rights, exposed to a more advanced news media. Nationwide coverage displayed an image of law enforcement which was overly aggressive. For citizens who have little to no interaction with law enforcement, this image being depicted is the only basis for definition of what is a "police officer". Combined with the history of civil rights in the United States, society has grown more anxious and distrusting of law enforcement. Police departments in recent years have established several different programs of training and policy reform in attempts to strengthen the relationship with their communities; yet the image remains. Law enforcement must cooperate with citizens in perilous situations regularly, and may find this difficult should the citizens not trust them.

Key Words: Implicit bias, news media, community policing, Ferguson effect, stereotypes, public opinion

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### Introduction and Positionality

Issues of civil rights and equal treatment for all citizens have been problems in the United States for much of the country's history. Stories of prejudice would remain unheard. In 1929, the Illinois Association for Criminal Justice published a crime survey in order to analyze high crime rates in Chicago and Cook County. At the time the police were focusing on criminals associated with Al Capone, but the survey also provided data on police activity throughout the areas: "African Americans accounted for only 5% of the region's population, they constituted 30% of the victims killed by police from 1927 to 1928" (Nodjimbadem, July, 2017). During the 1960's, news media began to shed light on racial issues at work in society, and started a massive influx of stories surrounding police brutality. These stories were frequently about violent action taken against civil rights protestors who were demonstrating peacefully. Decades of activism led to policy change within the higher levels of government but people, especially minority groups, still retain a strong discomfort with and fear of law enforcement.

A major contributor to the problem is the mainstream media, which continues to be flooded with reports of misconduct and abuse by police. While there have been many documented cases of police abuse and misconduct, this does not mean all officers are corrupt or distrustful. Yet, to a person who has no other interaction with police this negative, violent image is what they come to associate with law enforcement. Not all departments are to blame and much of the initial trepidation minority groups have for police is due to a lengthy and violent history, which can be hard to fully disregard. The challenge is that while media can be used for the betterment of society, it

can also be used to promote images and messages that are sometimes negative and damaging. Several news stations have been proven wrong when reporting on stories, or their details, or found information which was exaggerated. Dealing directly with citizens from diverse backgrounds, despite this long standing distrust, creates new anxieties in an already life-threatening environment. Positive images and familiarity can be improved through community engagement by law enforcement outside their normal duties. Community policing is based in the idea of strengthening community-police relations by allocating officers to particular areas to become familiar with the local populace. This kind of benevolent action combined with the policy reforms already undergone by law enforcement may begin to slowly change the negative image that has been created. The purpose of this paper is to examine the negative effects of the image of law enforcement shown in the media in the community, and how this image may complicate the job of police officers.

As a student of marketing, my university's curriculum focuses on the ability to persuade audiences to support a certain item. However, the ability to influence a group and gain their support is made much easier by creating common ground. When speaking on the issue of police brutality, there is plenty of viable evidence to pull examples from and influence others in the community to be resistant to local law enforcement. There have certainly been a number of situations in recent years viable enough to make a case toward police negligence and unwarranted brutality. My education in marketing has also taught me that the more a particular image is presented to an audience, the greater the chances that they will believe the image is accurate. The

image of police being shown to the public is flawed and characterizes a group of people based on the actions of a select few individuals. However, the image has been accepted by the public because the image represents the entirety of the public's experience with police outside of emergency situations. This mentality of immediate characterization is exactly what civil rights activists would attribute as a main issue when defending the rights of minority groups.

Although I have no direct ties to law enforcement and no family members with the police, I understand that police and other emergency services are a crucial part of the community. Throughout my life I have been afforded the chance to talk with law enforcement outside of crisis situations, and I now have friends either training to be police or already officers. My trust in the character of my friends and past interactions with police have given me a certain view of law enforcement: that just as with all people, a person should not be profiled based on assumptions and stereotypes.

### Literature Review

#### Police Efforts to Improve Image

In 2003, the research company RAND decided to test multiple theories in officer training and education in order to restructure the Los Angeles Police Department (Glenn, 2003). The department received a national level of infamy in 1991, when a video was released showing several officers beating unarmed, black motorist Rodney King. The trial and failure to indict any of the officers involved caused widespread riots throughout Los Angeles. News stations across the country reported on the entire case and its fallout in the city, displaying images which would begin to define police officers.



Even years after the uproar had ceased, the citizens of the Los Angeles area treated the police department as if their character was similar to that of the officers who were on trial. RAND is an organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help communities around the nation feel safer and secure. A particular area that RAND decided to address was the department's self-awareness of their reputation. Officers felt the hostility and resistance of the citizens was due to a lengthy history, making cooperation strenuous and was causing a state of anxiety and high alertness on duty. One theory put in place by RAND was instilling a sense of corporate professionalism that an employee would associate with a major business - the idea being that an act of misconduct by one officer would reflect poorly on the department as a whole, creating a greater commitment on officers to police each other and inspiring all to maintain a particular standard of service: "Success in attaining professionalism demands commitment to public service, requisite expertise throughout the department, and the realization that fellow officers have a responsibility to assist colleagues when situations stress the patience of even the best" (Glenn, 2003, p. 34). RAND also established a "Lessons Learned Theory" (or cumulative learning) which had been practiced by different branches of military over the years. Collecting and examining cases gives officers the ability to share innovative concepts or create solutions without waiting for lengthy approval by the chain of command, and then actively apply these to the field. RAND's goal was to create a department that would place the needs of the citizens at the forefront, and explored different institutions for inspiration.

Implementing new training practices and policies can be a rigorous process and it is important to improve a department's image; however even changes considered small or irrelevant can have a resounding impact. When Victor Cizanckas was hired in 1968 as the new police chief of Menlo Park, he understood that the department already had a strained relationship with the community and required more than policy reform to earn back their trust (Hall, 2016). Cizanckas was fascinated with an early study that suggested altercations between police and citizens had declined due to the change in uniform. California was a hotbed of police reform from the 1920s through the 1960s but one practice Cizanckas began was changing the militarized, navy blue uniforms of the officers to a blazer jacket and tie. This idea eventually spread to departments across the country displaying similar results. By challenging this preconceived image, Cizanckas was able to change the stereotype of the "militaristic police force" reaching back decades. The image Cizanckas portrayed also attracted prospective officers with higher levels of education and from non-traditional law enforcement backgrounds. Attempts to make police officers appear more approachable and transparent are still occurring in California. However, the state currently holds some of the country's strictest laws on prohibiting the release of details surrounding cases of police misconduct.

While policy reform is a pivotal step in changing the negative image of police to the community, there are other actions that can be taken. "Implicit bias refers to an unconscious form of prejudice or negative attitude about someone or something. It can be directed toward a range of subjects, including groups of people, products, areas, or concepts" (Ungvarsky, 2013). Implicit bias is a term used frequently when describing the

motives for police excessive force, but rarely do people consider that implicit biases may be formed about police as well. For people who have no interaction with police, implicit bias created by stories in the news media will cause them to be inherently uncomfortable around law enforcement officers. A consistent system of community outreach and policing with the locals of the neighborhood provides a positive image of law enforcement to dispel any implicit bias.

### Media's Effect on Police Image

The community actively retaining this constant fear and skepticism of law enforcement creates a mutual distrust of the citizens on the part of the police. The media directly highlighting acts of aggression against unarmed minorities has placed intense scrutiny on police departments across the nation. It is the job of news stations to report on the facts of a story, but when a highly controversial and racially charged story breaks in the news, it can be easy for the reporters to choose sides, reporting opinion rather than fact. A recent case for this would be the tragedy which occurred in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 when Michael Brown was shot by officer Darren Wilson. The protests which followed the shooting rallied behind the fallen youth and "Hands up, don't shoot" slogan which was said to be his last words (Rothman, 2014, p. 19). Repeated distrust for officers causes a prolonged, negative effect on the quality of policing within the public, creating an "Us vs Them" mentality amongst both law enforcement and the local populace. The ramifications of this broken relationship may have worse results than the community may realize. Officers "may respond to added scrutiny by pulling back from proactive policing and criminals may be more encouraged to offend" (Nix, 2017, p. 25).

Police must deal with added complications to their duties while being blamed for injustices that they did not commit. By blindly believing the implicit bias being created by the news media, the community is only making the situation between law enforcement and the people they protect more difficult to mend. Police officers are the group who are directly affected by this negative mentality, but the long-term effects will come to impact the community in far greater ways. The added pressure by the community from this negative image has severely impacted officers' performance in the field, especially in situations where various racial and social groups are involved.

These factors cannot be disregarded outright, despite the fact that so many citizens have pushed to remove socioeconomic and racial prejudice from law enforcement work. These reasons have resulted in several departments around the country that utilize body cameras to ensure officers are not abusing their positions. Today the availability of video coverage of police interactions allows for a certain level of transparency in police work around the country. Despite best efforts by law enforcement to be honest about their operations, a history of police brutality towards minority groups coupled with recent stories in the media have made mutual understanding between the community and law enforcement increasingly difficult. In the face of today's technology, including social media, breaking news can be seen by people across the country; meaning a greater number of people may be persuaded to see police as inherently violent and quick to use force. However a study in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* concluded a few major results, including that "video accounts of PUF are rated as more trustworthy when the video is attributed to 'national TV news' source than 'social media'

outlets” (Miethe, 2019, p.42). This is a promising sign that the community is not blindly accepting negative stories about law enforcement. However this creates a great deal of importance for the media to report on issues while remaining objective and accurate. As the frequency of these two factors begins to increase in national news, the faster a more honest depiction of police will begin to be present among the community. Many members of the community are aware of the dangers surrounding law enforcement jobs. Participants in Miethe’s study showed an understanding of police use of force when officers were dealing with people suspected of serious or violent crimes. Even more so in today’s social climate, equal understanding of what actions were taken has become a significant goal for police officers. It is crucial for major news stations to provide a high quality level of reporting, considering the trust they have cultivated with their audience.

At a time when national news stations can be viewed as potentially untrustworthy or biased, it grows more challenging for the truth to become known. Over the years people have complained to the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) about different news stations’ coverage surrounding political candidates. However the FCC cannot regulate cable channels because they are run through private providers instead of broadcasting via airwaves, meaning they are not allowed any input on what channels can air (Silverstein, 2017, Sep. 13). A person issuing a complaint about media coverage of law enforcement would receive no help if the station belonged to a private cable provider, even if their reasoning was valid. The role of media is beneficial for all societies, but the role of the media in democratic societies has a higher level of

importance. A democratic media allows for various opinions and stories to be broadcast to a large audience, and it is the role of the audience to determine whether the journalist is being truthful and unbiased in their investigation. Networks receive a fair amount of credibility from the public for being a “well-established” station and therefore a trustworthy news source, when this is not always the case. Media is a powerful tool to be used by the general public to stay informed and incite debate, but in some cases news media is being used to directly influence public opinion. “Public opinion aims to examine and criticize the work of state power, especially the secret state policy” (Leka & Kosumi, 2017, p.47). This mentality has been used when addressing the issues of excessive use of force in recent years and has led to a new wave of national protest. However the continued influence of the media on public opinion has created a new, stereotypical image of police: aggressive and bigoted, especially toward certain minority groups. Reporting on these sensitive topics displays the importance of factual information and how crucial objective viewpoints are in order to properly discuss these issues.

#### Creating a Believed Public Image

As a form of government institution, law enforcement departments are affected by mass media image especially more than other branches. How this image has been created can be attributed to multiple factors, but remains due to an unfortunate agenda setting pattern. This interactional process takes place between the mass media agenda, the political agenda, and the public agenda. The news media is responsible for reporting on these events, but has in recent years taken a different role in addressing the public.

While once more akin to objective observers, news media have now become places of tense debate over current issues where the network takes a definitive stance. As a result members of political parties are able to use stories of excessive use of force to demonstrate their beliefs and promote party affairs. Each region has the potential to impact the image of law enforcement but the most influential are the views of the general public. This public agenda has been excruciatingly hard to change due to a large population in the United States which distrusts the police; either due to personal experience, historical accounts, or recent tragic events that inspired activism and protest nationwide. As “public images are being socially constructed through mass media,” (Coman, Rezeanu, Mihalte, & Kiss, 2018, p.40) they are reinforced by historical accounts with little personal experience to create a basis for doubt amongst the public. Without community outreach programs or personal interaction with law enforcement, the public readily believes the negative images permeating through the media.

Despite the currently high level of scrutiny surrounding police today, this mentality has not always existed as commonly amongst the general public. There have been instances in the past where police legitimacy and trust in law enforcement were the messages being promoted by the news media. Sela-Shayovitz(2015) created a study in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology* which analyzed press coverage of police legitimacy before and during the course of the Second Intifada in Israel between the years 1998 and 2007. During this time the Israeli public received a massive influx of news stories from the Middle East concerning terrorist activities, and feared that devastating attacks could happen at any moment. These reports created a greater need

amongst the nation for justice both outside of its borders and within. As a result, the public showed a growing approval of police during this period that was based on two factors more than others: evaluating the procedural-justice process as fair and personal assessment of police performance as effective. This call for justice was coupled by a “patriotism approach” to reporting on police, meaning “that in the wake of a terrorism threat the media tend to be more patriotic and consequently foster police legitimacy” (Sela-Shayovitz, 2015, p.132). This case study shows the incredible potential of the news media to frame a topic and persuade public opinion to support or vilify certain groups. Soon after the terrorist threat in the Middle East began to lessen, police legitimacy amongst the community began to drop rapidly, and the media resumed reporting on stories of police inadequacy.

The media, especially major news stations, are meant to report on the facts of an event, but when the media begins skewing details the journalists are no longer performing their duties correctly. Law enforcement operate in a dangerous and unpredictable environment when doing their job, and only by reporting the facts can we make the correct decisions when tragedies happen. The press did not play an objective, dispassionate role in the extensive coverage of the shooting in Ferguson and the resulting upheaval: “by prejudging a complex story, by reporting rumor as fact, and by encouraging lawlessness with the suggestion that there was something noble about it” (Rothman, 2014, p.22). Other national tragedies have been reported on with heightened clarity, however stories surrounding excessive use of force have tendency to take a firm stance in the debate instead of just reporting the facts. Reporters on the scene in



Ferguson immediately began to demonstrate an activist approach to the situation, recalling the early days of the Civil Rights movement. During this time there was a group that was clearly subjectified, and it was easy for the media to choose which side to support. The police department in Ferguson was unsure of how to proceed with the case and remained fairly unresponsive as the threat of charges loomed. The response to the unrest was to call for riot police as reinforcements and to hopefully quell the situation, a fairly standard protocol. To the protestors in Ferguson this action only served to validate their assertions that the law enforcement was over-militaristic, and was looking to sweep any misconduct by the officer under the rug. Many of the early claims about the case in Ferguson were later exposed as distortions or false statements, but by that time massive civil unrest had descended upon the town and the violent image of police had become solidified (Rothman, 2014, p.20).

When people view videos of police officer-civilian confrontations, their judgements concerning the use of excessive force by officers are likely constrained by various framing factors. A study undertaken by Melissa Baker and Verne Bacharach (2017) for the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, focused on two frames in particular: informational frames and demographic frames. The negative image being believed is not the direct result of bias from the community. On frequent occasions it is the individual's background and personal experiences with law enforcement, combined with falsified statements surrounding a story being told in the news. Despite numerous efforts this image cannot be easily destroyed or replaced. For Baker and Bacharach's study, participants viewed a brief staged video of a physical confrontation between law

enforcement and a civilian. One group was informed that the video was a partial clip taken from a much longer interaction, the second group was informed of the rationale for the activity of the police officer. Participants were then asked in their opinion if the police officer had used excessive force. Both groups supplied the same, unfortunate result: “giving people warnings about the limitations of the video or information about police-civilian interaction protocols did not influence their excessive force judgements” (Baker & Bacharach, 2017, p. 695). The main power which media holds over this established image of police as inherently violent is their ability to influence and persuade an already uneasy community. This situation makes it crucial to provide a positive image of police to the community which they can use to formulate their own opinions, instead of referring to sources which supply only a violent focus.

### Methodology

Examining an image that is being promoted to the general public means that ascertaining the opinions of the community may shed some light on whether or not this image is still widely believed. As well, questioning the community on different aspects of policing and media’s influence may begin to show why this image has been accepted for so long. Law enforcement has made a considerable effort, especially in the last decade, to strengthen their relationship with the public. Responses would also address the public’s view of community outreach programs and their potential benefits. If the community agrees reform and outreach are the actions that should be taken by police to benefit their image, it would be important to deem whether or not they are aware of local police programs. To collect these responses, a survey was created which would ask

questions to the general public surrounding the issues of violent police image and media's influence. These questions were answered anonymously with the belief it would be promoting a higher level of sincerity amongst the participants. The questions being asked are meant to demonstrate the public's level of trust in law enforcement as well as their trust in different media outlets for truthful information. The hope is that the public is beginning to become more skeptical of major news stations and therefore more trusting of police officers initially, with deviations being attributed to the contextual frames of that person's upbringing. The ultimate goal of the survey is to provide a current view of popular opinion towards law enforcement, and determine whether higher scrutiny of news media is coinciding with a higher level of understanding for police officers.

#### Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to ascertain the public's perceptions of an image which is being promoted throughout various forms of media. As well, the research was meant to determine if police are taking the correct actions to appease the community's complaints, and how visible their efforts are. This creates a series of research questions:

RQ1: Why is the negative image of police so widely believed in society today? What is the role of media in establishing this image?

RQ2: Does a higher level of skepticism surrounding major news stories and media result in a higher level of trust and understanding for law enforcement?

RQ3: Are community outreach programs and community policing effective techniques when trying to dispel the violent image of police officers?

## Research Survey

This survey was given to about 45 different individuals of different ages and demographic backgrounds located in the San Rafael area of Marin County, CA. The results included here will cover the answers which pertained to the issues being discussed in this paper, and avoid answers to basic questions such as age and gender. Certain questions worked in unison with each other in order to encourage further critical thinking. The responses and implications of these questions will be discussed together in the “Survey Results” and “Survey Analysis” sections. The questions in these sections will be numbered as they are on the survey which was given to the respondents. The participants’ answers revealed certain trends which have potential to impact law enforcement occupations.

## Survey Results

Question 3: The participants were asked which media outlet they use to stay informed on news stories. The options listed included television, social media applications, radio or podcasts, newspaper or magazines, and the internet via a computer. Of these selections the highest chosen response was “social media applications”, with the second highest number of responses belonging to internet and television respectively.

Question 5: Participants were asked how consistently they watched the news on their chosen outlet. For several questions of this format a Likert Scale was used ranging from one to five utilizing different word sets customized to the question being asked. This scale was ranged from “Not at All” which represented one and “Every Day” being

placed at five, with “Often” taking the median spot. The majority of the participants chose “Occasionally” which was placed at the two spot on the scale. This was followed by “Often” which was at three, and “Very Often” at the four spot.

Questions 6 & 7: This question asked respondents if the stories being displayed in the news today were primarily negative. A majority of the answers showed that the general public finds this to be true: news stations are flooded with negative journalism. A follow up question asked the participants if this overwhelming presence of gloomy news stories was due to the fact that there are more of these stories to report on than positive, uplifting situations. To this question responses were almost evenly split, with the higher count belonging to “Yes”: there are more negative stories to report on than positive.

Questions 8 & 9: Participants were asked to reflect on the viewing history, and state how often in the news they see cases of law enforcement using excessive force. This was another instance where a Likert Scale was used, with the most chosen answer being “Often” which was placed at the median of the five point scale. The second most chosen answer was “Occasionally” listed at two, and “Very Often” at four. A follow up question asked respondents to recall how many cases of excessive use of force they saw resulted in death for one or more parties. A Likert Scale was once again used placing “None” at the one spot and “All That I’ve Seen” at five. The most chosen response was “Moderate Amount” which was the median, followed by “Very Many” at the four spot.

Questions 10 & 11: Participants were asked if they had ever personally considered a career in law enforcement, with a majority of the answers saying “No”. After this question, respondents were asked to give reasoning as to why they had or had not considered this occupation. The most prevalent reason was that respondents never considered law enforcement as a career while preparing to enter the workforce, others cited the job as too dangerous. The participants who had attempted to or had pursued a career in law enforcement mentioned their desire to impact their community, or family members who were police officers.

Question 12: Respondents were asked to rate their level of comfort around police officers using a Likert Scale rated “Not at All” at one and “Completely Safe” at five. The most chosen answer was the median option labelled “Indifferent”, followed by “Fairly Safe” which was put at four.

Questions 13 & 14: Participants were asked if the media had affected their previous views of law enforcement. This answer provided an almost even split, with “Yes” collecting only a few more responses than “No”. A subsequent question asked respondents who answered “Yes” to explain how their view had been affected and those that replied “No” to elaborate on how their stance remained the same. Explanations on how personal perceptions remained the same included that individuals were already cautious of police before media influence increased these feelings, or that they believed police officers to act as if they are above the law. Participants whose view had been changed positively recognized the cases being reported on represented only a minute group of officers guilty of misconduct. These participants also held some

personal interaction or connection with law enforcement which deterred them from making hasty judgements.

Questions 15 & 16: Respondents were asked if they had ever viewed a story in the news and later found the narrative to be false. This answer received a fairly even split with about 58 percent of participants answering “Yes”. The following area of the survey asked those that chose “Yes” to provide examples of false details being reported. Many of the participants cited the recent case surrounding celebrity Jussie Smollett and his reports of being attacked which were later thought to be fraudulent. Other examples referred to the tragedy in Ferguson and environmental issues being covered up or misrepresented.

Questions 17 & 18: Respondents were asked if they believed media could exaggerate the details of a story. For this question all participants answered “Yes”. A follow up question asked whether or not exaggeration could happen when reporting on stories of law enforcement. It was at this point that some of the respondents answered “No”, however the majority (81 percent) said “Yes” this is possible.

Questions 19-21: These questions each use a Likert Scale to gauge the public’s opinion on the cause of excessive use of force situations. On a scale of “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”, respondents were first asked if they believed cases of excessive use of force were the result of faults in the officer’s training. The most chosen answer was “Slightly Agree” followed closely by “Neither Agree nor Disagree”. The next question asked if these situations were caused by issues with the officer’s morals, such as prejudices or stereotypes toward the community. The responses for this question

followed the same pattern as the previous question. However there was a larger gap between the top two answers, with more people choosing “Slightly Agree”. The final question asked if cases of excessive use of force were the result of the high tension, unpredictable scenarios standard to police work. Following the same pattern as the previous two questions, the responses created an even greater gap between “Slightly Agree”, the most chosen, and “Neither Agree nor Disagree”.

Question 22 & 23: Participants were asked if there were news stations today which could be considered untrustworthy, to which a majority (81 percent) responded “Yes”. The part asked for examples of stations which could be trusted and stations which the respondents considered untrustworthy. The most common examples for trustworthy news stations were Kron 4, NPR, and ABC. Stations cited as untrustworthy were Fox News, CNN, and those connected to social media. For those that answered the previous question “No” an explanation was asked for. Reasons included the belief that journalists have a moral code to be objective observers and report facts and that participants had not investigated the validity of news stations they follow.

Question 24 & 25: The first question asked respondents if their perception of the news media had been affected changed by false details being reported. The answers formed a close split with 61 percent replying that their views on news media had been changed. The following section let participants explain how this has affected their views of the news media. Many answered that they fact check multiple sources when discovering a story and some that their initial reaction would be distrusting. This strained relationship with the news media caused some to decrease their viewership.



Question 26 & 27: These last two questions began by asking if the respondents believed community outreach programs would improve law enforcement image on the community, to which almost all replied “Yes”. The next question then asked if they were aware of any such programs in their local community. Most of the replies stated that they did not know of any active programs. The few who replied named “Coffee with a Cop”, “Ambassadors of Hope and Opportunity”, and “Homeless Outreach Team” in Marin.

## Survey Analysis

### Media’s Influence

The results of the survey demonstrated some highly intriguing details about the power of the media to persuade an audience to believe an image. Social media was chosen as the most utilized medium to stay informed on current news, however of the several options, this medium should be the least reliable. Many social media applications rely on bloggers or outside news stations to receive word of breaking issues. Since these apps are getting their information second hand, there is a higher probability that details will be distorted, even if unintentionally. At several points respondents explained that their growing distrust of the news media lead them to check outside sources, and could have potentially lead to use of different social media applications. This scrutiny has certainly negatively affected the frequency of viewership, with many respondents stating they only view the news occasionally. This trend to restrict exposure to major news stations has a damaging effect on law enforcement, particularly because stories of excessive use of force appear often. There exists a

higher probability, as demonstrated in the survey, that when a subject does view the news that a hurtful image of police will be shown, which either reinforces previous negative perceptions or works to persuade audiences that this image is accurate. During these scenarios, it is also common for news journalists to interview eyewitnesses and local citizens to provide more detail. These accounts can be highly emotional and are more vulnerable to exaggeration, presenting a false image of the situation to thousands of viewers. This dynamic helps show why the false, violent image of police has continued existing for so long, especially when many of the reports seen by participants involved deaths for one or more parties, although hypercriticism of law enforcement led other participants to become more understanding of police work and the dangers involved. Some viewed the constant negative reporting as unjust, and as a result felt more respect towards police officers for dealing with these situations and still performing their duties.

### Views of Police

Law enforcement is vital to community infrastructure, however not many people wish to become police on their own accord. Along with being a dangerous profession the constant scrutiny and prejudice makes this occupation much more difficult and deters potential candidates (Glenn, 2003). Those who considered a career in law enforcement were motivated by personal reasons which placed the concern of others before themselves, and represents a promising example of the personality of active police. Many of the respondents stated that they felt more safe around law enforcement than uncomfortable. While this may be due to the region which the participants live in

(Marin County, CA), the hope is this change is due to a shifting view of police amongst the general public caused by a higher skepticism of news media. The public will be more inclined to carry out their own individual research and form personal opinions without media influence. The tendency for media to exaggerate the details of a story was addressed in the survey and had unanimous agreement from the respondents. They also agreed that exaggeration happens with cases of excessive use of force. However, if respondents are aware of these factors, why does the negative image of police remain? It is due to the various truthful cases of police misconduct and history of violence concerning minority groups. A negative image of law enforcement is therefore more readily believed by the general public and more easily promoted by the news media.

Another crucial factor to determine was what the general public determined was the reason behind cases of excessive use of force. Three possible causes were presented to the respondents to choose which was the most accepted. Despite widespread efforts at reform many respondents felt faults in the officers' training was a significant issue. De-escalation techniques and sensitivity training are standard parts of law enforcement training now, but the general public is uninformed on these adaptations as they are not reported on with the same fervor as police misconduct. Certain cases of misconduct have been the result of racial or social biases, and while this is not the only reason, it was more widely believed by the respondents. While this belief may partially be due to the contextual frames of the respondents and their personal experience, media's influence cannot be ignored. If the image of police being displayed is constantly

one of aggression and prejudice, then an individual with no prior interaction with law enforcement will come to believe this image is true. The last reason given for excessive use of force was the potential for dangerous, high tension situations to arise for law enforcement while on the job. A larger and more definite split amongst responses appeared, showing that a majority of the respondents agreed with this statement. This could show that the public is becoming more aware of the several strenuous factors involved with police work. However, another possible explanation is that some respondents believed that high tense situations were handled incorrectly due to poor training; addressed in the previous questions. Either way, police operate in an unpredictable environment and must be able to trust that the public will be cooperative during their interactions.

The role of law enforcement is to protect and serve the community, whether or not the community is aware of their efforts. Many of the active community programs partnered with police are created from outcries from the public for reform. Ninety-five percent of the respondents agreed that community outreach would improve the image of law enforcement. However, almost that same percentage of people were unaware of any such programs locally. Respondents stated in various comments that their opinions of news media had caused them to carry out individual research, but no matter the level of extra digging these programs do not receive much exposure. There is a tendency for news stations to report on negative stories more frequently than positive ones, but for law enforcement the overwhelming presence of the negative has made it seem impossible to the community that any positives might exist. The minority who were able

to provide examples named programs which allow community members to speak with law enforcement in a neutral setting about any of several topics. Sometimes these citizens are homeless or have fallen on hard times, and are looking to police for advice, guidance, or friendly conversation. These programs provide a perfect opportunity to become comfortable around law enforcement and form their own perceptions without influence by the news media.

### Views of News Media

The most promising signs that the image of law enforcement was improving were the examples of greater scrutiny when viewing major news stations. Practically all respondents agreed that the media is flooded with negative stories, and a considerable amount believed this was indeed because there are a majority of negative stories to report on. There also exists a saying in news media that “if it bleeds, it leads” meaning that violent stories have a tendency to be given more exposure. Even if law enforcement is making a greater, positive impact in the community a story about police misconduct will almost certainly be reported on instead. If a viewer’s perception of the news itself is negative, then any story they view will already be adversely affected by one contextual frame when there are still social, racial, and historical factors to consider. This is why the amount of respondents who conducted their own research before forming opinions is so promising to creating a positive police image. However, not all of the respondents carried out such measures because they still place some trust with news stations, with about 40 percent saying they had never seen a story and later found details to be false. This number is a troubling sign of media’s continued influence on the

general public. A fairly recent example of a story changing its narrative in the news is the case of Jussie Smollett, who created a false police report about being attacked for his race and sexual orientation, which several of the respondents cited as an example.

However this trust is not completely blind because all respondents believed that the media can “exaggerate” the details of a story, with 81 percent saying this happens with stories of law enforcement. This begs the question as to where the line between initially reporting misleading details and exaggeration of the narrative falls. How does the general public determine when the news media is attempting to persuade them to support a certain side? If the community truly does believe that stories about police could be embellished in any way, they should not be so quick to accept stories about police misconduct as fact. The majority of respondents even believed that there are active news stations which can be considered untrustworthy in their reporting of events. This could be the result of political or social biases which affect viewership, both positively and negatively, but the trend amongst responses was to put little trust in stations which presented their show as “entertainment” more than journalism. The general public put their trust in stations which took a neutral stance toward issues and provided evidence only. For those who answered that they had never witnessed false details being reported, it is possible that the individual was a viewer of one such station they felt had greater credibility. Finding one such station may have been the result of individual research done by respondents and will prove beneficial should another nationally debated case of excessive use of force appear. The discovery of high credibility news stations may also account for a percentage of the respondents who

answered that their view of the news media had not been affected by the reporting of false details. Raising the standards for news stations and advocating for objective journalism will lead to more accurate portrayals of all institutions in the country, not only law enforcement.

### Limitations

The efforts to improve the negative image of law enforcement is a national challenge, and because of this the size of the sample area used to conduct the research does not reflect the opinions of individuals from drastically different social climates. The major influencing factor to an individual's perception of police was their socioeconomic background and personal experiences, meaning dispersing the survey to a larger demographic would require an understanding the regions being researched. Exploring how the opinions of the public may change as different different regions of the country are surveyed may provide data displaying the country's division or unification over the topic. A widespread survey would also give data showing the influence of politics on public perception of law enforcement. Certain areas of the country are historically or politically supportive of law enforcement, and examining whether these opinions have remained static would have proven beneficial to the study. Another area that could have been explored is how the respondents felt about different minority groups' history with police. Determining whether participants believed officers were more prejudiced towards specific groups would give a clearer understanding of their perception of police. Gaining the opinions of law enforcement about how they are viewed in the media, and how this impacts their interactions with the community, would have provided interesting

supplementary data. As is always a challenge when dealing with sensitive issues, participants may have felt compelled to answer in a way that was seen as “socially acceptable”. Current responses by law enforcement would show whether the public’s views on law enforcement were being externally demonstrated to their local officers, and if their responses truly were honest.

### Conclusion

While the purpose of this paper was to demonstrate the sway that media holds over the general public using law enforcement as an example, the results of this research have proven much more. Data has shown the public are beginning to question the legitimacy of news stations and their methods. Multiple respondents stated they carried out their own individual research because they no longer trusted the media, even though many still felt the negative image of police was accurate. The perception of law enforcement as violent is believed so easily in today’s society due to a combination of contextual frames specific to a person’s socioeconomic background and a hard stance against police taken by the news media when issues of misconduct appear. Journalism allows for the distribution of facts to all members of the public so that they make their own assertions, yet when dealing with intense national issues the trend is now to pick a definitive side. History has provided a reason for members of society, especially minority groups, to stand against law enforcement. The public’s fear of persecution by police as the result of stereotyping is what keeps them from trusting law enforcement initially, and the constant portrayal shown in the media reinforces this belief. Exhaustive efforts by at police reform have shown a focus on putting the



community first, and were collectively agreed on by the public as the proper technique to change the established, negative image. However, many of these programs remain unknown and are therefore ineffective at making any positive impact. The inability to provide a positive public image is the result of several factors, but the issue's longevity is the result of biased reporting. By shedding light on the biases in the media and providing more exposure to law enforcement's work within the community, a more realistic image of police will begin to emerge.

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