

# Students' Perceptions of Women in Policing: The Role of Media Portrayal and Representation of Policewomen

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**Abstract:** *Purpose:* Diversity and representation are important for organizational growth and sustainability, particularly in policing, where women are highly underrepresented. Although attitudinal research in policing is extensive, little has been done to assess factors that influence citizens' perceptions of women in policing. This study, therefore, investigates the effects of media and film representation of women in policing on students' perceptions of the female police officer.

*Design/Methodology:* Using a cross-sectional design, the study obtained data from 152 university students enrolled in one of the major research institutions in a southern state of the U.S. during the 2023-2024 academic year.

*Findings:* Using a multivariate analytical approach, the study did not support the hypothesis that negative portrayals of policewomen in media significantly influence students' perceptions.

*Originality:* The findings of the study provide information that could be useful for improving citizens' attitudes toward women in policing and enhancing the police-citizens relationship. The manuscript offers an original contribution to the study of policing, especially as it relates to factors that influence perceptions of police officers.

**Keywords:** Media Representation, Public Perception, Women in Policing, Students, Law Enforcement, Public Attitudes.

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity and representation are pivotal in the growth of organizations, particularly in policing, where women make up less than 15% of the total force (Goodison, 2022). While various factors contribute to this underrepresentation, media portrayals of female officers in television and film can potentially shape public perceptions, influencing both aspirations to join the police force and overall views on women's capabilities in law enforcement. Although several government initiatives have aimed to increase female representation within the police force, accomplishing this objective has proven challenging, despite the implementation of various strategies (Walby & Joshua, 2021).

Research has consistently highlighted the significant contributions of female officers, particularly in cases involving sexual assault, rape, and victimization, and also notes that departments with higher proportions of female officers tend to file more reports and make more arrests in such cases (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). Moreover, increased female representation promotes community policing and diversity (Donohue, 2021).

Likewise, female officers can facilitate greater openness and reporting among female victims of rape and sexual assault (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018; Meier &

Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). This stems from the fact that female officers have been noted for increasing community trust (McDevitt *et al.*, 2008; Rowe & Ross, 2015). Despite the profound contributions of female officers to the community, women make up only 12% of the police force across local police departments (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Kringen, 2014). Highlighting persistent challenges in achieving gender parity, the challenges are further complicated by prevailing media narratives.

Media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice-related matters (Eschholz *et al.*, 2003; Gerbner *et al.*, 2002), with television and film serving as major sources of information (Dominick, 1978; Dowler, 2002). Many individuals form their perceptions of law enforcement based on indirect experiences through media exposure (Surette, 2007). The world of film and television has long served as a powerful mirror reflecting societal norms, values, and expectations. Within this expansive realm, the portrayal of law enforcement personnel has been a recurring theme, shaping and, in turn, being shaped by public perceptions. According to Nielsen Media's (2023) report, traditional television consumption has not decreased, despite the rise of media sources like digital recorders, internet connectivity, and social media in addition to standard televisions. However, the (2023) report shows streaming is huge and in 2022 alone, "Americans watched 19 million years' worth of streaming content" (Nielsen, 2023). Additionally, due to the level of

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convenience technology offers, the realm of mobile streaming enables the average American to watch about 151 hours of television every month (Gandosy, 2009). Likewise, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reports that the average American above 15 years old spends at least 3.9 hours a day watching TV. Out of these numbers, law enforcement content has made up more than 20% of shows over the past 50 years (Hetsroni, 2012; Jones, 2003).

Although existing research has explored the representation of police in crime-related media and its influence on public perceptions of police (see, e.g., Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007), there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the portrayal of female police officers in film and television and its specific impact on public perception. This study seeks to address this gap by drawing on data from a college student sample to offer valuable insights into college students' media consumption and their perceptions of women's roles in policing. The consensus is that movies and television have a major role in shaping public opinion of law enforcement (Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Surette, 2007). The findings from this study will enhance the existing literature by deepening our understanding of how media representation of policewomen in television and film influences public perception. The results will provide valuable insights into media practices, diversity initiatives, and a better understanding of women's roles in policing.

### **Understanding the Influence of the Media on Attitudinal Formation in Policing: Theoretical Framework**

According to the cultivation theory, prolonged exposure to media content can mold and cultivate people's views of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The premise focuses on the cumulative effects of repeatedly being exposed to certain media themes and imagery. The main idea posits that individuals who watch television extensively are more likely to adopt perspectives that align with the prevailing narrative conveyed through television messages (Shrum, 2017). The hypothesis mentioned above by Shrum (2017) can be applied to the fact that people who extensively watch policing television shows are likely to adopt perspectives about police based on the content of the shows. Thus, individuals who engage in frequent television watching are inclined to adopt viewpoints that lean towards the dominant narrative presented by television, particularly leading to more conservative

stances on criminal justice matters (Shrum & Lee, 2012). Morgan and Shanahan (2010) note that since 2000, the theory has been the subject of over 500 new articles and over 125 linked publications. As a result, it has been ranked among the top three mass communication theories cited most frequently between 1956 and 2000 (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Cultivation theory comprises two variations: mainstreaming and resonance (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Mosharafa, 2015; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Both variations are separate yet related. Mainstreaming refers to the process by which frequent television viewers, regardless of diverse social backgrounds, develop a shared perception of social reality shaped by the dominant values and messages consistently portrayed in the media, particularly those involving derogatory or violent content (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Heavy television consumption fosters a shared, mainstream perspective on social issues and norms. For instance, individuals with differing ideological backgrounds, such as liberals and conservatives, may, through repeated exposure to crime-related content portraying law enforcement as effective and justified, come to adopt a common, more authoritarian view of the criminal justice system.

Conversely, resonance occurs when a person's personal experiences align with the ideas and concepts promoted by the media, enhancing the cultivation effect (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The theory suggests that individuals who have real-life experiences that mirror the themes and messages portrayed on television are more likely to be strongly influenced by the media content. In conclusion, cultivation theory posits that prolonged exposure to consistent media portrayals shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality. Aligned with this framework, the present study argues that repeated negative portrayals of policewomen in television and film may influence viewers to adopt more negative attitudes toward the police in general and toward female officers in particular, as these portrayals become integrated into their understanding of law enforcement.

### **Media Representation of Police**

The media depiction of police contrasts with both favorable and unfavorable portrayals. According to Dowler and Zawilski (2007), media consumption and public perceptions of the police are closely related. Television and films serve as educational tools and

socialization platforms, providing audiences with exposure to cultural aspects beyond their immediate experiences. Similarly, those with limited interaction with the criminal justice system often rely on media sources to understand crime, offending, sentencing, policing, and related subjects (Deutsch & Cavender, 2008; Dowler *et al.*, 2006). In other words, the public primarily acquires information about crime and justice through media consumption (Ericson *et al.*, 2019; Roberts & Doob, 1990). Crime dramas depict policing predominantly as crime-fighting, often neglecting to showcase the administrative facets of the profession. Research suggests that images of policing from movies and television programs have created heightened public expectations about actual police work (Wilson *et al.*, 2020). For example, the portrayal of the frequency of how crime is solved in policing often creates unrealistic expectations among viewers regarding the efficacy and speed of real-life crime-solving (Wilson *et al.*, 2020). This, in turn, leads to dissatisfaction when officers fail to meet the standards depicted by media representations (Perlmutter, 2000). This is partially correct because the primary duty of the police is to reduce crime. Furthermore, police officers are portrayed as heroes and crime fighters who occasionally resort to bending or breaking the law to achieve their objectives (Surette, 2007). An example of this is evident in *Dirty Harry* (1971), where the protagonist, Harry, a police officer, resorts to unconventional methods to pursue a serial killer, disregarding proper legal procedures. Driven by an intense determination to apprehend the killer, he employs every possible tactic. This is particularly evident in crime dramas where officers deviate from standard procedures.

A significant portion of American television programming is dominated by prime-time crime shows. For instance, by the mid-2000s, the TV show *CSI* was reportedly viewed by up to 40 million people each week (Hughes & Magers, 2007). The extent to which these shows exaggerate to emulate reality is referred to as the "CSI" effect. Mustafaj & Van den Bulck (2021) refer to it as "the effect that *CSI* and other crime-related shows have on actual legal proceedings." Consequently, police work is disproportionately shown on television, contributing to an overrepresentation of the effectiveness with which officers carry out their duties (Wilson *et al.*, 2020).

Police reality series (i.e., a genre of television programming that presents unscripted situations, real-life events, or contests featuring ordinary people rather

than professional actors; see Grumbein & Goodman, 2013) are gaining substantial popularity in television programming and presenting diverse portrayals of law enforcement. Contrary to potential negative portrayals, other research indicates that these shows often depict the police in a positive light, successfully resolving crimes (Dominick, 1978; Estep & MacDonald, 1984; Kooistra *et al.*, 1998; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Reality television programs, as outlined by Donovan (2016), portray the law-and-order philosophy by depicting the police as intelligent, sensitive, caring, and capable. Doyle (2003) argues that these broadcasts disproportionately focus on acts of violence and crime resolution rates. Other studies suggest that police reality programs often perpetuate prejudices regarding ethnic minorities and criminal activity (Kooistra *et al.*, 1998; Oliver & Armstrong, 2018). According to Surette (2007, p. 108), the overall outcome is a scenario where "crime control is praised, while due process is criticized." The construction of crime and justice in these programs predominantly relies on individual factors contributing to crime, the presumption of guilt for suspects, and the portrayal of an adversarial relationship between different groups.

While numerous studies explore the impact of media portrayals of police officers in news media on public perception, there is limited research on how police representation in film and television influences public perception. Furthermore, while numerous studies focus on the portrayal of police in reality shows, there is a scarcity of research specifically addressing this representation in films, especially for female officers.

### **Media Representation of Women in Policing**

The portrayal of women in law enforcement in the media has wide-ranging consequences for how society views and defines gender roles. Furthermore, the rising prominence of policewomen in many media forms has paralleled the diversification of law enforcement personnel. According to Wilson & Blackburn (2014), the portrayal of women in the police has a significant impact on public perceptions and attitudes, impacting their views on the role, talents, and validity of women in this field. Women in law enforcement have frequently been portrayed in media narratives through stereotyped representations and confined to restricted roles such as mother figures and officers assigned to sexual assault, rape, and domestic violence cases (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018). Moreover, policewomen are also portrayed as undercover detectives in sexual

contexts, often “exploited for their sexual dimensions or used as baits for criminals” (D’acci, 1994, p. 111). Across all forms of media, including television shows and movies, common themes may be observed that either uphold traditional gender roles or treat female officers as objects. These depictions have the potential to influence public opinion, reinforcing existing prejudices and shaping people’s perceptions of the competency and acceptability of women in law enforcement professions.

Historically, the media has inadequately portrayed women in police, often associating them with sexual exploits or using them as bait or objects of seduction for criminals (Cox, 2012). In the television show *Policewomen of Broward County* on The Learning Channel, the main protagonists were four female police officers who were also portrayed as mothers and wives. Cox (2012) conducted a textual analysis of the language used to describe these female officers on the show, and they found that much of the language focused on the women’s sexual appeal, often discussing their bodies provocatively. However, some episodes also portrayed female officers performing police stops and arrests in a manner like their male counterparts (Cox, 2012). Concerning how these portrayals impact public perception, Maeder and Corbett (2015) argue that given the ubiquity of crime drama, individuals who extensively watch such shows are likely to shape their perceptions based on the portrayals within these programs. Additionally, Deutsch and Cavender (2008) also assert that, as crime shows often present storylines with an “air of authenticity,” viewers may frequently perceive fictional depictions as accurate representations of real-life occurrences within police departments. Not only does the portrayal of women in law enforcement jobs contribute to diversity on television, but it also has a cultural impact, shaping popular perceptions of authority, professionalism, and gender roles (Brooks & Hébert, 2006).

### **Public Perception of the Police: The Influence of the Media**

There is research evidence indicating that law enforcement agencies derive their authority and legitimacy from the public they serve. Positive perceptions enhance trust and confidence in the police, fostering cooperation and collaboration between law enforcement and the community (Boateng, 2012, 2013; Jackson & Bradford, 2010). This trust is crucial for effective crime prevention and solving. Conversely, negative perceptions can lead to distrust, alienation,

and even hostility towards law enforcement, undermining their ability to fulfill their duties and maintain public safety (Maguire & Johnson, 2010). Public perceptions of the police are based on citizens’ experiences and thoughts about police *service quality*, *justice*, and *legitimacy* (Boateng, 2018; Maguire & Johnson, 2010). Mastrofski (1999) defined the scope for *service quality* with attributes such as attention, dependability, responsiveness, competence, manners, and fairness to the service-oriented aspects of policing. In further explanation, citizens desire that their experiences and interactions with police officers be characterized by these qualities. Again, Maguire and Johnson (2010) argue that these attributes serve as a traditional pillar by which public perception of the police is measured; negative experiences of people using these measures can negatively impact public perceptions of the police.

Justice theorists link procedural justice, which refers to the fairness of the legal process, to how the public perceives the police (Boateng, Pryce, & Abess, 2022; Grant & Pryce, 2019). When citizens attest to fair procedural justice, it can influence positive perceptions of the police and vice versa. The procedural justice model suggests that if the police fairly handle citizens, it will increase their level of legitimacy, which will lead to a positive perception of the police (Boateng *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, treating citizens unfairly will lead to chaos and a negative public perception of the police. In effect, if the police portray negative aspects of police procedural justice, based on cultivation theory, it will negatively affect the public (Boateng, 2019; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

Finally, a significant aspect of public perception relates to the notion of *legitimacy*, defined as the inherent quality compelling others to willingly comply with authority, legislation, or an organization’s choices and commands (Maguire & Johnson, 2010; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Huo, 2002). The legitimacy of the police is the citizens’ ability to accept the authority of law enforcement without any coercion (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Consequently, the way police legitimacy is portrayed in film and television is crucial in shaping public perceptions of the police.

Also, the media serves as the primary source of information on crime and justice for the public (Ericson *et al.*, 2019; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 2007). Scholars have argued that while it is uncommon for individuals to believe that news media significantly alters perception, films shape public views more

significantly (Mustafaj & Van den Bulck, 2021). Typically, individuals spend twice as much time watching TV and films in a day compared to the time spent on news consumption (Donovan & Klahm, 2015). A London study on media and perception found that after watching an episode of *Juliet Bravo* (a widely acclaimed British television police procedural drama in the 1980s that depicted the work of uniformed police officers, with Inspector Jean in a lead role), children's beliefs about male officers' physical capabilities declined (Gunter *et al.*, 1991). Conversely, there was an increase in the perception that male officers enjoyed exerting authority, took pleasure in fighting, and lacked strength. Before the test programs, children perceived male officers as strong and tough, while female officers were seen as vulnerable. However, after viewing the program, more youngsters perceived women officers as possessing strength, influenced by a female officer's commitment to physical fitness. The episode also highlighted a temporary shift in perceptions about male and female officers linked to the program's content.

Contrasting research findings indicate that the portrayal of policing is not one-size-fits-all. While some shows portray the police positively, others also suggest a negative approach (Surette, 2007). While opinions on the portrayal of the police in different forms of media are divided, several scholars support the argument that people's perceptions of the police are shaped by their exposure to media (Boateng & Kaiser, 2019; Huang & Vaughn, 1996; Maguire & Johnson, 2010).

### Current Focus

The primary purpose of this study is to understand how the media representation of policewomen in film and television affects public perceptions of police and specifically, of women in policing. Much of the existing research tends to focus on general portrayals of law enforcement without disaggregating by gender and also examining gender differences. This results in a limited understanding of how female officers are uniquely represented in media compared to their male counterparts. Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1. A negative portrayal of policewomen by the media will influence students' attitudes toward police officers. Specifically, it is expected that when policewomen are portrayed negatively in TV and movies, students will have negative perceptions of police.

H2. A negative portrayal of policewomen by the media will negatively influence students' perceptions of

policewomen. Specifically, it is expected that when policewomen are portrayed negatively in TV and movies, students will have negative perceptions of policewomen.

## METHODS

### Data Source

Data were collected in March 2024 from students attending one of the largest public institutions in the Southern United States through an online survey and flyer distribution. Due to time and resource constraints, convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants. This method was appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study and allowed access to a relevant and available sample of college students, who are frequent consumers of film and television and therefore suitable for examining perceptions of media representations of policewomen. Permission was obtained from instructors teaching various criminal justice courses, who then assisted in distributing the Qualtrics survey link to their students. The survey was open for 10 days, during which email reminders were sent to encourage participation.

### Sample Description

The study initially collected data from 194 respondents through Qualtrics. However, 34 cases were excluded due to incomplete responses, resulting in 160 usable surveys for analysis. Given that most participants are criminal justice majors, their views about the police may not differ significantly due to their academic training, limiting generalization of the findings to the entire student body. The descriptive statistics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Most of the respondents were females (68%) and predominantly white (71.3%). There are other demographic variables, including Black/African American (16%) and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity (15%). The reported age was between 19 and 51 years, with a mean age of 22 years. Table 1 indicates that most of the respondents have favorable *perceptions of the police*. The mean value is above 10 (range: 3-15), indicating generally favorable perceptions of policing. Also, respondents generally have positive *perceptions of policewomen* (mean=11.5, range: 6-15). Regarding *the portrayal of policewomen*, more than 50% of the respondents agreed with the items, demonstrating a generally negative portrayal of policewomen in television and film. While most of the respondents indicated a strong agreement about the negative portrayal of

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

| Variables   | Min | Max | %    | M(SD)       |
|---|-----|-----|------|-------------|
| Gender - Female                                       |     |     | 67.5 |             |
| White   |     |     | 71.3 |             |
| Black/African American                                |     |     | 15.6 | 22.10(5.05) |
| Hispanic  |     |     | 15   |             |
| Age   | 19  | 51  |      | 22.10(5.05) |
| Personal contact with the police                      |     |     | 40.6 |             |
| Friend of family police stop                          |     |     | 50   |             |
| Interaction with the police                           |     |     | 50   |             |
| Perception of police                                  | 3   | 15  |      | 10.41(2.85) |
| Perception of policewomen                             | 6   | 15  |      | 11.53(2.03) |
| Portrayal of policewomen                              | 7   | 25  |      | 17.33(3.53) |
| Consumption of police procedural media                | 0   | 6   |      | 3.10(2.15)  |
| Consumption of police-related films                   | 1   | 9   |      | 2.14(1.44)  |
| Positive portrayal of police-citizenship relationship | 1   | 5   |      | 3.24(1)     |
| Impact of policing shows on public perception         | 1   | 5   |      | 2.79(1.15)  |

policewomen in television and film, approximately 20% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the items.

Table 1 also indicates that almost half of the participants have had personal contact and some form of interaction with the police in the past year. Most respondents (44%) have friends or family in law enforcement. Half of the sample students have friends and family who have been stopped by the police within the past year. On average, 50% of respondents are frequent viewers of police-reality television shows like *Forensic Files* and *The First 48*, and approximately 16% watch at least four police-related films like *Training Day* in a month. Likewise, 46% of respondents also indicated that they watch police procedurals like *Criminal Minds* and *NCIS* at least once a month. While 18% of respondents indicated that they never watch police reality shows, approximately 50% of the sample said they hadn't watched any police-related film within the last month.

## Measures

### Dependent Variables

The study has two dependent variables: Perception of policing and perception of policewomen. *The perception of police* is a summative scale constructed from three items: Thinking about policing in general, note your level of agreement with the following statements: 1) The police use fair procedures, 2) the

police treat people with dignity and respect, 3) the police do their jobs effectively. Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). Factor loadings ranged from 0.85 to 0.89 and Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. Higher scale scores on this variable indicate that respondents have a more positive perception of police.

*Perception of policewomen* is a summative scale constructed from three items: Thinking about policing in general, note your level of agreement with the following statements, 1) Policewomen are generally competent, 2) Policewomen often use appropriate levels of physical force, 3) Policewomen treat people more fairly than male officers. Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). Factor loadings ranged from 0.69 to 0.80, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.63. Higher scale scores on this variable indicate that respondents have a more positive perception of policewomen.

### Independent Variable

Considering that the focus of this research is the portrayal of policewomen in television and film, the primary independent variable is the *perceived portrayal of policewomen in TV shows and films*. It is a summative scale constructed from five items: Participants' level of agreement that policewomen are

portrayed as 1) caregivers, 2) sexual bait for criminals, 3) administrative assistants or receptionists, 4) people who bend the rules to get results, and 5) emotional. Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, and strongly agree = 5). The items align with stereotypes and traditional gender roles commonly depicted in existing literature about policewomen. For example, portraying policewomen primarily as caregivers is viewed negatively here because it emphasizes their caregiving roles over their roles in law enforcement. Similarly, portraying policewomen as sexual baits for criminals signifies objectification; while depicting them as administrative assistants suggests a limitation to lower-ranking roles, reinforcing traditional gender norms. As such, each of these items was worded such that higher scores indicate more negative perceptions of policewomen. Factor loadings ranged from 0.56 to 0.79 and Cronbach's alpha was 0.72. Higher scores on the variable indicate a more negative perception of how policewomen are portrayed.

### Control Variables

This study controlled several variables, including respondents' demographic characteristics. Age is a continuous variable, and sex is a dichotomous variable capturing both male =0 and female =1.<sup>1</sup> Race and ethnicity were coded as 0=not Black/African American and 1=Black/African American; 0=not Hispanic/Latino and 1=Hispanic/Latino, respectively. Other control variables were also included in the analysis. First, respondents were asked if they had any *close friends or family* who are law enforcement officers (0=no, 1=yes). Participants were also asked to rate *how they feel generally about policing* (10-point scale). Higher scores on this measure indicate that participants have more favorable views toward the police. Participants were also asked to indicate how much time they spent watching police-related content: 1) Police-reality shows like *Forensic Files* and *The First 48* (0=Never, 1=Less than once a month, 2=Once a month, 3=Two or three times a month, 4=Once or twice a week, 5=Three to four times a week, 6=Daily) and 2) Police procedurals like *Criminal Minds* and *Blue Bloods* (0=Never, 1=Less than once a month, 2=Once a month, 3=Two or three times a month, 4=Once or twice a week, 5=Three to four times a week, 6=Daily). Both measures were coded such that higher scores indicate greater viewing frequency. Respondents were also asked how many

police-related films like *Training Day* and *The Other Guys* they had seen in the last month (0 to 9+). Participants were also asked to indicate if they had recently (within the past year) had any personal contact with the police (0=no, 1=yes), some interaction with the police (0=no, 1=yes), or if friends or family had recently (within the past year) been stopped by the police (0=no, 1=yes).

### Analytical Strategy

The analysis in this study comprises a three-step process. Initially, descriptive statistics were conducted on all variables, offering a comprehensive representation of sample characteristics. Subsequently, a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship among the variables and to determine whether multicollinearity is a concern in the regression analysis. The results of this analysis, as presented in Appendix 2, show that collinearity is not an issue with the data analyzed since the correlation between the two IVs did not exceed the 0.77 threshold. In the final step, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis was used to assess the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables.

## RESULTS

### The Influence of Media Portrayal of Policewomen on Perceptions of Police

To estimate the effect of media portrayal of policewomen in TV/film on public perception of police, an ordinary least squares regression model was conducted (see Model 1 in Table 2). The model was significant ( $F = 2.076, p < 0.05$ ) and explained 16% of the variance in the perception of police variable. After controlling for the effects of other variables in the model, the media portrayal of policewomen did not have a significant impact on students' perceptions of the police. However, the effects of other control variables were observed. For example, Black/African Americans negatively and significantly predicted perceptions of police ( $b = -2.149, p < .001$ ), indicating that being a Black or African American student corresponds to a negative perception. Furthermore, there was a positive and significant relationship between the perception of police and the positive description of police-citizen relationships in television shows and films ( $b = 0.526, p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that respondents who reported that the media positively portray police-citizen relationships tend to have a favorable perception of the police.

<sup>1</sup>Sex was coded as (0=male/transgender male, 1=female/transgender female).

**Table 2: Predictors of Students' Perceptions of the Police and Policewomen (N = 143)**

|   | Model 1<br>Perception of the Police |         | Model 2<br>Perception of Policewomen |          |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|----------|
|   | b (SE)                              | t       | b (SE)                               | t        |
| Portrayal of policewomen                          | -0.06(0.07)                         | -0.89   | -0.05(0.05)                          | -0.99    |
| Personal contact with police                      | 0.33(0.49)                          | 0.67    | 0.18(0.34)                           | 0.52     |
| Friend or family police stop                      | -0.49(0.49)                         | -1.02   | -0.43(0.34)                          | -1.28    |
| Interaction with the police                       | 0.07(0.47)                          | 0.14    | 0.28(0.33)                           | 0.85     |
| Consumption of police procedural media            | 0.59(0.12)                          | 0.50    | 0.08(0.08)                           | 1.01     |
| Consumption of police-related films               | 0.18(0.17)                          | 1.07    | 0.16(0.12)                           | 1.37     |
| Positive portrayal of Police-citizen relationship | 0.53(0.23)                          | 2.28    | -0.03(0.17)                          | -0.21    |
| Impact of policing shows on public perception     | -0.12(0.2)                          | -0.57   | -0.22(0.14)                          | -1.54    |
| Female  | -0.52(0.55)                         | -0.93   | -0.11(0.39)                          | -0.28    |
| Age   | 0.05(0.05)                          | 1.01    | -0.03(0.04)                          | -0.72    |
| Hispanic/Latino                                   | -0.47(0.65)                         | -0.73   | -1.50(0.45)                          | -3.33**  |
| Black or African American                         | -2.15(0.64)                         | -3.35** | -1.58(0.45)                          | -3.54*** |
| Constant  | 9.65(2.14)                          | 4.50*** | 14.10                                | 9.40***  |
| Model Fit   |                                     |         |                                      |          |
| F-value   | 2.076*                              |         | 2.65**                               |          |
| R <sup>2</sup> (adjust)                           | 0.16                                |         | 0.19                                 |          |

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Scale Items**

| Variables                                    | Strongly Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Neither Agree or Disagree | Somewhat Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|  | Frequency (%)     | Frequency (%)     | Frequency (%)             | Frequency (%)  | Frequency (%)  |
| <i>Perception of police</i>                  |                   |                   |                           |                |                |
| Use fair procedures.                         | 10 (6.3%)         | 22 (13.8%)        | 23 (14.4%)                | 88 (55%)       | 17 (10.6%)     |
| Treat people with dignity                    | 11 (6.9%)         | 26 (16.3%)        | 30 (18.8%)                | 75 (46.9%)     | 16 (10%)       |
| Do their jobs effectively                    | 8 (5%)            | 21 (13.1%)        | 33 (20.6%)                | 79 (49.4%)     | 19 (11.9%)     |
| <i>Perception of policewomen</i>             |                   |                   |                           |                |                |
| Competent                                    | 2 (1.3%)          | 2(1.3%)           | 18 (11.3%)                | 64 (40%)       | 73(45.6%)      |
| Use appropriate levels of force.             | 4 (2.2%)          | 8 (4.5%)          | 63 (35.2%)                | 60 (33.5%)     | 24 (13.4%)     |
| Treat people more fairly than male officers. | 2 (1.1%)          | 13 (7.3%)         | 57 (31.8%)                | 50 (27.9)      | 37 (20.7%)     |
| <i>Perceived portrayal of policewomen</i>    |                   |                   |                           |                |                |
| Caregivers                                   | 3 (1.7%)          | 16 (8.9%)         | 25 (14%)                  | 88 (49.2%)     | 26 (14.5%)     |
| Sexual bait for criminals                    | 7 (3.9%)          | 20 (11.2%)        | 26 (14.5%)                | 65 (36.3%)     | 39 (21.8%)     |
| Administrative assistants/receptionists      | 7 (14%)           | 24 (13.4%)        | 30 (16.8%)                | 67 (37.4%)     | 29 (16.2%)     |
| People who bend the rules to get results     | 17 (9.5%)         | 46 (25.7%)        | 53 (29.6%)                | 35 (19.6%)     | 7 (3.9%)       |
| Emotional                                    | 6 (3.4%)          | 25 (14%)          | 32 (17.9%)                | 74 (41.4%)     | 21 (11.7%)     |

Note: Frequencies do not total to sample size due to system missing or incomplete survey response.



**Table 4: Correlation Matrix**

|          | POP    | PPW      | MP     | Age    | PP      | PRS     | PF     | MPP    | PS     | Black  | Hispanic | Female |
|----------|--------|----------|--------|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|----------|--------|
| POP      | —      |          |        |        |         |         |        |        |        |        |          |        |
| PPW      | 0.347  | —        |        |        |         |         |        |        |        |        |          |        |
| MP       | -0.105 | -0.040   | —      |        |         |         |        |        |        |        |          |        |
| Age      | 0.163* | -0.006   | -0.090 | —      |         |         |        |        |        |        |          |        |
| PP       | 0.033  | 0.093    | 0.130  | -0.049 | —       |         |        |        |        |        |          |        |
| PRS      | 0.006  | 0.142    | 0.034  | -0.058 | 0.611** | —       |        |        |        |        |          |        |
| PF       | 0.065  | 0.143    | 0.041  | 0.125  | 0.295** | 0.390** | —      |        |        |        |          |        |
| MPP      | 0.126  | -0.032   | -0.024 | 0.014  | 0.142   | 0.077   | -0.023 | —      |        |        |          |        |
| PS       | -0.103 | -0.074   | 0.073  | -0.014 | 0.125   | 0.147   | 0.124  | -0.023 | —      |        |          |        |
| Black    | -0.263 | -0.199*  | -0.065 | -0.023 | 0.227** | 0.211** | 0.041  | 0.035  | 0.078  | —      |          |        |
| Hispanic | -0.008 | -0.207** | -0.095 | -0.052 | -0.151  | -0.062  | -0.018 | -0.048 | -0.031 | -0.133 | —        |        |
| Female   | -0.118 | 0.042    | 0.197* | -0.149 | 0.209*  | 0.216** | 0.059  | 0.076  | -0.053 | 0.057  | -0.080   | —      |

Note. N=160 POP=Perception of police, PPW=Perception of policewomen, MP=Media portrayal of policewomen, PP= Police television shows, PRS= Police reality shows PF=Police-related films, MPP= Media portrayal of a police-citizen relationship, PS=Policing shows' effect of citizen's view.

\*\*p < 0.01: \* p < 0.05 (2-tailed).

### The Effect of Media Portrayal of Policewomen on the Perception of Policewomen

The second hypothesis assumes that the negative portrayal of policewomen in TV/film is associated with a negative perception of policewomen. Thus, the effects of media portrayal of policewomen in TV/film on public perception of policewomen were examined using ordinary least squares regression (see Model 2 in Table 2). The model was significant ( $F = 2.649^{**}$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and explained nearly 20% of the variance in the perception of the policewomen variable. After controlling for the effects of other variables in the model, the media portrayal of policewomen did not have a significant impact on students' perceptions of the policewomen. However, the effects of other control variables were observed. For example, Black/African Americans negatively and significantly predicted perceptions of policewomen ( $b = -1.497$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that being a Black or African American student corresponds to a negative perception. Also, Hispanics/ Latinos tend to have less favorable

perceptions of policewomen when controlling for the effects of other variables ( $b = -1.581$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Given that the media influence plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice-related matters (Eschholz *et al.*, 2003; Gerbner *et al.*, 2002), it is relevant to explore the effect that media representation of women in policing has on public perception of the police. Existing studies indicate that a significant portion of society gains knowledge about crime and the criminal justice system not through firsthand experience, but through media exposure (Surette, 2007). Scholars have discussed media portrayals of policing, particularly women in police, and how it impacts perceptions of police (see, e.g., Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). However, just a handful of studies examined how the portrayal of policewomen in film and television impacts the perception of the public. Therefore, to contribute to existing literature, this study explores the multifaceted nature of media influence on

public perception and fills a void in understanding the connection between media representation of policewomen and public perceptions of police. To do so, the study used OLS regression to test two important theoretical assumptions.

Although important observations were made, the study's two hypotheses were not supported by the findings. That is, the assumption that a negative portrayal of policewomen in films and TV will negatively influence students' perceptions of police officers in general (hypothesis 1) and policewomen specifically (hypothesis 2). The lack of support for either hypothesis is quite surprising given prior research arguments about the crucial role that media plays in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice-related matters (Eschholz *et al.*, 2003; Gerbner *et al.*, 2002). Existing literature also suggests that mass media (e.g., television and film) are a significant source of information in society (Dominick, 1978; Dowler, 2002). Thinking about the factors that could have contributed to a non-significant relationship between media portrayal and public perception of policing, both the sample and sample size could be contributing factors. The sample for this study was primarily (78%) criminal justice students who may have had exposure to information on crime and justice-related matters. They could be considered "experts" in the field who do not necessarily need television shows and films to form their perceptions about police and policewomen. This is because the Criminal Justice Department offers coursework that could directly shape their perceptions of the subject matter, such as media and crime or policing classes. Thus, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution.

Although the main variables of interest were not supported, race/ethnicity had some impact on both perceptions of police and perception of policewomen. Hispanics/Latinos and Blacks/African Americans had less favorable perceptions of both policewomen and police. These findings highlight how crucial diversity is for police departments, especially when it comes to increasing representation of Black/African American and Hispanic minorities. A Bureau of Justice Statistics report indicates that in 2020, only 11.6% of police officers at the state level were black, with Hispanics totaling 14.2% (Goodison, 2022). While they do not give specific numbers for female officers, it can be inferred that minority female officers are relatively few. Introducing new recruitment methods to make policing attractive to minority females is crucial because while there are few women in policing, studies have

documented female officers' significant roles in the community (e.g., being assigned to investigate sex or child crime cases or serving on community policing units). A study by Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006) supported the assertion that police departments with higher proportions of female officers tended to file more reports of sexual assault, as well as arrest more individuals involved in sexual assault and rape cases. Moreover, some evidence suggests that having an adequate representation of female officers promotes diversity and improves community policing (Donohue, 2021). Additionally, strengthening the police/citizen relationship, particularly in minority communities, may help communities form better perceptions about the police.

Moreover, positive portrayal of police-citizen relationships in TV and film has a positive impact on participants' perception of policing. Interestingly, when participants perceived how police-citizen relationships were positively portrayed in television and film, they were more likely to have positive perceptions of the police. By implication, when media portray a positive police-citizen relationship, individuals who watch television and film have more positive perceptions of the police. This finding uncovered a surprising aspect of the sample: while negative portrayals did not notably influence their perception, positive portrayals *did* have an impact. Prior studies suggest that negative personal interactions carry more weight in shaping perception than positive ones (Boda & Medve-Bálin, 2017), but this study's results suggest that a positive portrayal of police positively affects perception more than a negative portrayal.

Like all research, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was drawn from students enrolled in criminal justice courses; thus, results from this research should be interpreted with caution. Consequently, participants in the sample may view police differently; thus, the findings may have limited generalizability to the wider university population or college students generally. Also, about 68% of the sample were females, which likely affected the results of the study. Future research endeavors should consider expanding the sample to include students from other majors. Second, the survey relied on self-reported data, which is susceptible to social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may provide responses that they perceive as socially acceptable or may inaccurately recall their media consumption habits or perceptions. Despite these inherent biases, the

exploration nature of the research mitigates this concern.

Third, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time. Consequently, this design choice constrains the ability to establish causal relationships between variables and does not accommodate changes in perceptions over time. While the exigencies of time precluded the possibility of conducting a longitudinal study for this study, future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to elucidate changes in perception over time. This would be particularly useful to track changes in perceptions of students as they progress through criminal justice courses, which could provide valuable feedback to the department as to the effectiveness of coursework in countering media-related stereotypes.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While media portrayal did not emerge as a significant predictor of perceptions in this study, the importance of accurate and balanced representation of law enforcement in media remains. Increasing the proportion of female writers, producers, and directors can have a huge impact on combating negative stereotypes. Additionally, the race effect persisted even when accounting for media. Both Blacks/ African Americans and Hispanics do not appear to distinguish policewomen as a group from police as an institution and have similar negative perceptions about both. The findings show that increasing the representation of women would potentially aid in enhancing police/citizen relations. It also demonstrates the need for diversity and inclusion initiatives within law enforcement agencies. There are already hiring initiatives in place, such as the 30x30 Initiative, so policymakers should prioritize efforts to recruit and retain officers from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds to improve trust and legitimacy and build stronger relationships among communities of color. However, the unintended implication is that diversity initiatives may not have the direct and immediate effects that are intended, so diversity initiatives should be approached with intention and care.

In conclusion, the regression results suggested there is not enough evidence to accept the hypotheses above. However, even though media portrayal of police does not influence participants' perceptions of police and policewomen, other demographic factors such as race and ethnicity may play a more significant role in individuals' perception of policing and policewomen

within this field. Furthermore, a positive portrayal of police-citizen relationships in TV and film has a positive impact on participants' perceptions. These findings underscore the importance of considering diverse factors when examining individual perceptions of police.

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Received on 21-05-2025

Accepted on 19-06-2025

Published on 22-07-2025

<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2025.14.13>

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