LAW & DISORDER: THE MEDIA’S INFLUENCE ON COLLEGE STUDENT’S
PERCEPTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to analyze the attitudes college student at Rochester Institute of Technology have toward law enforcement officials based on their television media habits and any real life experience they have with law enforcement.

This literature review provides a preliminary analysis of research related to the communication theory Cultivation Analysis by George Gerbner, research on various perspectives toward law enforcement, and the influence media has on society.

Primary research was conducted with student volunteers at Rochester Institute of Technology. The online survey asked students about their television media habits as well as any experience they may have had with law enforcement figures in their lives.

The results were analyzed through a series of statistical test and found that there were similar attitudes toward law enforcement by students pertaining to fictional crime dramas and news programs as well as those students with real life experience with law enforcement.
Introduction

Over time there has been a great amount of research (Dowler, 2003; Gaeta, 2010; Gallagher, 2001; McGuire, Mastrofski; O’Connor, Hogan, Unnithan, 2012) conducted on the attitudes held toward law enforcement officials. The research does not consider the possible impact that the media, especially television dramas based on crime, has on the perceptions individuals hold toward law enforcement as well as any real life interactions citizens have with law enforcement figures.

In today’s society the media plays a major role in the everyday lives of people and certainly in college student’s everyday lives. Nielsen reports that people ages 18-24 spend about 16 hours per month on average watching video on the internet (2013). With the ability to stream video on-demand through Netflix, Hulu, and various other providers students can watch their favorite television shows any time in any place with an Internet connection. MarketingCharts, a marketing research branch of Watershed Publishing publication, reports that in 2009 college students were spending at least 2.5 hours a day watching television. The media is always ready and available for college students who choose to access it. With the accessibility of the media being what it is there may certainly be some influence on the individuals who take advantage of this and use the media at a consistent rate. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Justice declared that 16.9% of residents in the U.S. who are 16 years old or older have had some type of person-to-person contact with police. These real-life interactions college students have with members of law enforcement alongside exposure to law enforcement though the media may add to or completely influence the perceptions formed toward the field of law enforcement and those who work within it.
In order to effectively examine the impact of the media, this study addresses what college students at Rochester Institute of Technology are watching in the media. Popular television shows such as *Law & Order*, *Breaking Bad*, *Criminal Minds* and *Sons of Anarchy* paint very different pictures of policing and law enforcement. Programs like *Law & Order* and *Criminal Minds* portray law enforcement as superhero-like crime stoppers that solve cases with ease every time. Other shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy* depict law enforcement as a menace. Law enforcement become the characters that the viewers root against. News outlets frequently concentrate on negative stories including reports on police brutality or unsuccessful investigations when law enforcement cannot solve a case. With a small percentage of college students who have any real life interaction with law enforcement, one may assume that a majority of college students base their view of law enforcement on what they see in the media alone.

**Hypotheses**

For the purpose of this study the research is split into two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is focusing on fictional television shows as an influential medium and the second focusing on the news as the influential medium. It is assumed for the first hypothesis that if college students watch fictional television shows that portray law enforcement in an unfavorable manner and do not have any real life experience with law enforcement they will develop a negative attitude toward law enforcement. The second hypothesis assumes that if college students are exposed to news that portrays law enforcement in a negative manner on a regular basis and do not have any real life experience with law enforcement then college students will develop a negative attitude
toward law enforcement. The aim of this study is to determine how different mediums and exposure to law enforcement in these mediums as well as in everyday life will shape college students’ perceptions of police officers, lawyers, special agents and the like. The media as well as the lack of real life interactions may be two of the biggest contributors to the major misperception of law enforcement. Television shows portray law enforcement in a certain way and “the antics of fictional cops are telling viewers something about the real world, thus distorting their image of law enforcement” (Giles, 2002, p. 107). Whether the media portrays law enforcement in a positive or negative manner, they are shaping the way individuals view these characters. Popular television shows among college students such as *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy* make the villains out to be the “good guys” and law enforcement officials become the “bad guys”. Students are bombarded with the notion that police officers especially should be despised. A police officer is “regarded as corrupt and inefficient by, and meets with hostility and criticism from, the public” (Tooley, 2009, p. 2).

**Literature Review**

Television is a dominant medium, especially among Americans. Individuals often plan their day around when their favorite shows will air and the television itself is many times the focal point in a room. Early research known as Cultivation Analysis done by George Gerbner focuses on the effects of television shows on society. This mass media can reach audiences at a county, state, national and international level. “Its drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent system of images and messages into every home” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 177). One message has the ability to reach millions of homes, potentially influencing attitudes, beliefs, and
opinions. There is a shared culture of those who watch the same networks and programs on a regular basis. The people who consistently watch and enjoy a particular show make it a part of their daily or weekly routine. “Surveys show that the general amount of viewing follows the style of life of the viewer” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 178). People become fascinated with the stories told on television and they talk about their favorite shows and televised events with co-workers, friends, and family. With today’s usage of social media people are even chatting with complete strangers about what is happening on television as it happens.

Gerbner’s Cultural Indicators approach investigates the scope in which watching television contributes to the audience’s beliefs and actions toward areas such as gender, health, science, stereotypes toward minorities and age groups, family, education, religion, politics and many other topics like these (Gerbner, 1998). The Cultural Indicators approach is broken up into three areas of focus: institutional process analysis, message system analysis, and cultivation analysis. Cultivation Analysis looks at the amount of exposure to television and examines how the amount of television one is exposed to affects their view on reality. Gerbner’s goal when collecting data was to determine if individuals with heavy television viewing were more likely to respond with the “television answer” (Gerbner, 1998). The thought process behind this notion was that television viewing contributes to the viewer’s conceptions toward social reality. By looking at both light and heavy viewers in the same demographic subgroup there is the potential to observe the differences in responses in regards to social reality.

From the time that mass media developed prominence within society it has been the focus of many studies, particularly the amount of influence it holds over the public.
“One of the most persistent debates in academic and lay circles concerning the mass media is the extent to which media can be said to cause anti-social, deviant or criminal behavior” (Jewkes, 2011, p. 10). Essentially, researchers question to what point do the images shown in media cause negative effects on the viewers? This is not to say that watching television shows about criminals will cause all viewers to begin committing crimes. It simply suggests that individuals with criminal behavior tendencies may turn to committing certain crimes and in a certain manner based on what they have seen and are influenced by in the media. The Hypodermic Syringe Model theorizes the relationship between media and its audiences, stating that it is an unsophisticated process, by which the media injects values, ideas and information into a passive receiver (Jewkes, 2011, p. 13). These injected ideals are fundamentally negative and therefore produce negative thoughts and actions in those that receive the messages. One of the first instances in the United States in which the relationship between the media and its audience and the affect a message can have on its audience was on Halloween night of 1938. The radio broadcast of H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* was meant to entertain listeners with a story about an alien invasion. As the broadcast was airing many people believed what they were hearing was actually happening. There was mass panic and many people fled their homes in fear of what they believed was happening (Jewkes, 2011, p. 14). This event and others like it show that the media is convincing at times and can influence what people believe to be true about the world.

Certain events like the *War of the Worlds* broadcast dominate headlines and capture the attention of Americans until the next big story occurs. “Events have to be a certain level of perceived importance or drama in order to be considered newsworthy”
News reporters and editors at a local, national or global level choose stories by what has the potential to get the most attention from their target audience. “In other words, petty crimes such as vandalism and street robberies are likely to feature in the local press (and will probably be front page news in rural or low-crime areas) but it takes offences of a greater magnitude to meet the threshold of national or international media” (Jewkes, 2011, p. 45). Reporters know what types of stories are most likely going to capture the attention of their audiences. Today’s society becomes fixated with violent crimes and the media creates celebrities out of criminals. This puts high expectations on members of law enforcement. For those who follow a story in the media, many people develop their own theory of what happened and expect law enforcement to come to the same conclusion. The theories developed by people outside of law enforcement are usually based on what they learn from the media. Gallagher, McGuire and Matrofski (2001) take into consideration the fact that perceptions change over time and are manipulated from a multitude of factors. They pose the question, “To what extent are positive/negative fluctuations a function of highly publicized events (e.g., the Rodney King incident, the O.J. Simpson trial, the Diallo case), and to what extent are they the product of social, cultural, economic, and crime trends (Gallagher, 2001, p. 16)?” The research also took into account the general images as well as expected outcomes and processes of law enforcement. Those who have high expectations for law enforcement officials may become disappointed by the reality of an officer’s work depicted poorly through the media causing them to develop a critical opinion. Recent criminal cases like the shooting of Trayvon Martin put law enforcement in the spot light. This case and others like it are talked about constantly in
the various mediums: television, social media, newspapers and magazines. College students are updated frequently on the events of this and other cases that get a lot of media attention. When a case does not get solved or the result is not favorable to the public law enforcement is often blamed.

Since the media has the ability to reach millions of people worldwide the chances that it affects how people perceive the world seems undeniable. Kenneth Dowler’s research on the media and the public’s attitude suggests that the media does in fact greatly influence how society perceives law enforcement. Dowler’s (2003) research suggests that the perceptions of the public toward victims, criminals, and law enforcement officials is determined largely by the mass media’s portrayal of these groups (Dowler, 2003, p. 109). There is a major fascination among western society with crime and the justice system depicted in television, books, newspapers, movies and other forms of mass media. Dowler makes the assumption that since violence is portrayed so often in the media the public becomes fearful of crime and criminality. “Crime portrayed in television is significantly more violent, random, and dangerous than crime in the ‘real’ world” (Dowler, 2003, p. 110). This belief is said to cause people to fear becoming victims of crime. College students, especially women in college, have a preconceived notion that they will become victims of crime. This may be directly due to the fact that they watch fictional shows with a new crime occurring each week and multiple victims per episode and the news, which reports crimes occurring in the area they live. This is why RIT and other universities have security measures such as the blue light security system throughout campus, public safety officers, and emergency alerts. “Heath and Gilbert (1996) find that the relationship between media presentations
and crime is dependent on characteristics of the message and the audience” (Dowler, 2003, p. 110). An individual who is exposed to large amounts of local crime on the news may likely have the belief that crime is rampant in their area, causing them to feel fear of becoming a victim to a crime. A sample from the 1995 National Opinion Survey on Crime and Justice (NOSCJ), a random telephone survey of about 1,000 adults in the United States, examines issues related to criminal justice (Dowler, 2003, p. 112). The findings of the survey suggest that fear of crime is increased by watching crime-based shows on television. “Respondents who report that they are regular viewers of crime shows are more likely to be fearful of crime” (Dowler, 2003, p. 112). The amount of consistent exposure these individuals have to television shows presenting crime affects the level of fear for crime and victimization.

Law enforcement is portrayed in various ways in the media. Fictional crime dramas often depict law enforcement officials as superhero like characters, always solving the crime in each episode, while news outlets focus on crimes that will draw a lot of attention despite the success or failure of law enforcement. According to Gaeta (2010) the media’s messages about law enforcement’s effectiveness and authority shape public perceptions, which ultimately affects opinions of police legitimacy. (Gaeta, 2010, p. 523) Certain actions of law enforcement recorded in the media, whether with good intention or not, can destroy any positive views about them. Nonfiction stories in the news in particular can give negative attitudes toward law enforcement when the public does not understand their actions. In late March 2014, the Albuquerque Police Department encountered scrutiny when within ten days there were two fatal shootings by police (Contreras, 2014). Both of the events were captured on video and the public
considered the actions of the police officers questionable. Many hold the opinion that the police officers used unnecessary use of deadly force since they had non-deadly weapons available. This event and others similar to it are highly publicized in the media because a) they draw a lot of attention and b) they show the imperfections of law enforcement. Television shows like *To Catch a Predator* work toward shaping the public’s view of law enforcement by showing individuals the law in action (Geata, 2010). Its goal is to entertain audiences while raising awareness on how child predators seek victims. Actual law enforcement officials play a small role in the show, usually tackling the predator as he tries to leave, but the show intends to give the audience a positive impression of both journalism and law enforcement. “Current psychological research (Sunshine & Tyler) suggests that public willingness to cooperate with police is predicated, in part on a perception of the police as legitimate” (Geata, 2010, 536). The manner in which television shows portray members of law enforcement may influence their perceived legitimacy. *To Catch a Predator* was created with good intentions however, it was questioned on ethics in journalism and this caused some to question law enforcement’s involvement with the show. The legitimacy of their involvement was challenged putting them in a lose-lose situation. If they do not get involved then some people may be angry that they are letting a criminal go free and if they do get involved some people will contest the legitimacy and fairness of the situation.

Information that is given to the public by news media may potentially affect the public’s opinion toward law enforcement. At times media personnel do not have every fact about a crime that occurred and rush to present the information to the public. In some cases scholars have argued how the police are presented as being unrealistically
effective (Doyle, 1998; Marsh, 1991; Roshier, 1973; Sacco and Fair, 1998; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981) while at the other end of the spectrum Graber (1980) contends that news media tends to focus on law enforcement’s failed attempts to control crime and solve cases (Chermak, 2005, p. 262). The conflicting portrayal of law enforcement in the media takes away from the legitimacy of law enforcement officials and leaves the question of how the contradictory depictions affect public attitudes. Events that are considered newsworthy seldom consist of stories about a police officer that purchases hot chocolate for a homeless person on a cold night. The media broadcasts stories that will capture the attention of an extensive audience that feature shocking and controversial events. Incidents of police misconduct often reach the headlines of the news. In 1996, there were multiple accusations for several off-duty white officers of the Indianapolis Police Department for being intoxicated and disruptive, using racial and sexist slurs, and repeatedly hitting two males before arresting them (Chermak, 2005, p. 264). There was a lot of hype surrounding this story that generated from the fact that these police officers targeting a White male as well as an African-American male. This particular police department had recently been targeted by other accusations by the media causing the public to question the legitimacy of the department. Without all of the accurate facts and details on the story the public may have been lead to believe a story that may or may not have occurred the way in which the media illustrated it.

There are many possible influential factors that contribute to the attitudes individual’s have in regards to law enforcement. Chermak, McGarrell, and Gruenewald (2005) argue that the strategies and tactics used by law enforcement impact how people in society perceive members of law enforcement. “One of the goals of this
project was to examine public perceptions of aggressive patrol strategies before and after the implementation of an initiative to crackdown on violent crimes” (Chermak, 2005, p. 266). There had been previous research done to study the factors that influence attitudes toward police since the 1960s (Decker, 1981) however, with the growth of mass media cases of police misconduct are reaching millions of people worldwide, creating new research questions to answer. The research done by Chermak, McGarrell, and Gruenewald (2005) consisted of random telephone surveys to adult citizens living in three areas of Indianapolis. “Each area consisted of two police beats resulting in four contiguous police beats, or neighborhoods, and two comparison police beats surveyed” (Cermak, 2005, p. 266). The results from this body of research indicated that as citizens concerns about neighborhood crime problems increased, the general attitudes toward the police decreased, which was expected (Chermak, 2005). The researchers also concluded that the crime scale variable did have an affect on general attitudes toward police after a highly published Brawl trial, which was an incident involving members if the Indianapolis Police Department who were on trial for charges including public intoxication and pointing a firearm (Chermak, 2005). This speaks to the fact that the media has the ability to shape what the public believes to be true about law enforcement. If the Brawl trial did not get as much publicity as it did and the citizens of Indianapolis were unaware of the incident, then public opinion may not have been influenced.

There are forty-nine states in the USA with state law enforcement agencies, Hawaii being the only state without a state agency. Very little research has been done in the past that focuses on public attitudes toward state law enforcement. “Among the
public, knowledge about state law enforcement agencies have been drawn from personal experiences and anecdotes or the popular media” (O’Connor, 2012, p. 527). It is common for a family member, friend, or coworker to share a story about being stopped by a state police officer while driving and for many people this is the only interaction they will have with a member of law enforcement. CHiPs, a popular crime drama with a hint of comedy in the 1970s featured the lives of two California Highway Patrol officers (O’Connor, 2012, p. 527). The show was not completely realistic, but it did give the public an idea of what life is like as a highway patrol officer. CHiPs inspired other television shows such as, COPS and The First 48 to attempt to show the public what life is really like for members of law enforcement. The research done by O’Connor, Hogan and Unnithan (2012) looked into how citizens of Colorado perceived the Colorado State Patrol. Their findings concluded that attitudes toward the department were generally favorable (O’Connor, 2012). Attitudes and perceptions can be influenced by individual, contextual, and contact-related factors (O’Connor, 2012, p. 536). Any incident, whether personal or observed, may influence how a person develops a particular attitude about law enforcement. Individual contact with the police and the nature of the contact has a particular effect on attitudes toward the police or in particular, state law enforcement (O’Connor, 2012, p. 536).

Methods

The population sample featured in this study includes undergraduate students enrolled at Rochester Institute of Technology. Rochester Institute of Technology is a private university located in the Rochester, New York metropolitan area. It is comprised of nine academic colleges with approximately 15,000 undergraduate students. In order
to obtain a random sample of undergraduate students, a convenience sample was used after identifying a series of undergraduate student emails provided by professors in the College of Liberal Arts, Saunder’s College of Business, and the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences. The participants did not include a wide variety of areas of study however, there were various ages, sexes, races, levels of education and political orientations. Students were contacted via email and informed that they may choose to participate in an online study. The email notification included a message that they have been chosen to take part in a study as well as a link to the online survey. When the survey was first opened the students viewed an electronic consent form requesting their participation in an online questionnaire concerning television viewing habits and perceptions of law enforcement. The consent form also included information regarding the estimated duration it would take to complete the survey, benefits of the study, how the results will be used, as well as the fact that their identities would remain anonymous. Upon receipt of the consent form, each participant was instructed, “by beginning the survey, you acknowledge that you have read this information and agree to participate in this research, with the knowledge that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.” Students who clicked “next” on the consent form were then directed to the questionnaire portion of the survey.

This study used an online self-administered questionnaire that was divided into three distinct sections. The first section consisted of questions pertaining to media habits, specifically television. The second section contained questions primarily about attitudes toward law enforcement as well as questions about real-life experiences with law enforcement. The third section included questions about demographic information.
The depth of the research allowed for various sets of variables to be used pertaining to each section of the survey.

In the first section of the survey participants were asked if they watched television, if they watched news programming, if they watched fictional television programs and if they watched fictional television shows based on crime and criminals. They were also asked to report how many hours of each of these they watch each day. Next, participants were given a list of news programs, which included CNN, Fox News, 60 Minutes, ABC News, MSNBC, HLN, and CNBC. They were asked to check all that they watch and were also given the option to choose “other” or “I do not watch news programs”. Participants were also given a list of crime-based shows and asked to choose all that they watched. This list included the popular crime and law enforcement television shows Breaking Bad, Bones, Burn Notice, Criminal Minds, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, Dexter, Law & Order, The Mentalist, NCIS, Orange is the New Black, Sons of Anarchy, The Sopranos, Weeds, and White Collar. This list also included “other” and “I do not watch crime based programs” for participants to choose. The survey then asked if participants “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree” that the fictional television shows about crime and law enforcement listed accurately portrayed law enforcement. A similar question was also asked pertaining to news and if students felt that the news accurately portrayed law enforcement in their community. They were given the options of “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree”. In an effort to better understand the attitudes students have toward law enforcement they were then asked to choose if they “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree” that police officer’s always look out for the public’s
interest before their own in addition to if they feel that their local police department provides accurate information on important current events in their community. For other influential factors that may have an impact on attitudes toward law enforcement the survey included questions about real-life experience with law enforcement. First, the survey included the question “Do you have a family member (immediate or extended family) that is a member of local or federal law enforcement?” Participants were also asked if they have ever had a face-to-face interaction with a member of law enforcement. For additional details about a face-to-face interaction with law enforcement they were asked if they had been arrested or had been a victim of a crime. If participants had not been a victim of a crime they were asked to then determine on a scale of one to ten how fearful they were of being a victim of a violent or nonviolent crime in their life (one being no fear and ten being very fearful). For the participants who identified as a victim of a crime they were asked if they felt law enforcement was helpful in the investigation and if law enforcement was successful during the investigation. Students were then asked if they “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree” that public safety officers are needed at Rochester Institute of Technology and if they feel that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. Finally, participants were asked to provide their age, sex, race, education level, and political orientation.

There were a total of 96 participants for the online survey. The average age of participants who reported their age was 19 years old with education levels ranging from freshmen to seniors. 63.95% of participants were female and the other 36.05% were male. Of the 86 students who reported their race, 2.33% chose Other, 2.33% identified
as Hispanic, 5.81% identified as Asian, 8.1% identified as African-American (non-Hispanic/black), and 81.4% identified as Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white). Out of the 96 participants, 85 a political orientation. 7.1% chose the Conservative category, 12.9% identified as a Republican, 14.1% chose Other, 17.6% identified themselves to be a Democrat, 21.2% chose Liberal, and 27.1% identified as an Independent.

**Results**

As previously noted this study involved two hypotheses with the goal of understanding the relationship between student’s television habits, real-life interactions with law enforcement, and their attitudes toward members of law enforcement.

**Hypothesis 1:** If college students watch television shows that portray law enforcement in an unfavorable manner and do not have any real life experience with law enforcement then college students will develop a negative attitude toward law enforcement.

**Hypothesis 2:** If college students are exposed to news on a regular basis and do not have any real life experience with law enforcement then college students will develop a negative attitude toward law enforcement.

A series of statistical analyses were used to determine frequencies and what variables possessed a significant relationship. Analyses in SPSS included *Crosstabs* and *Independent Samples t-Test*.

The first set of Crosstab analyses crossed each fictional crime based television show listed on the survey with attitudes toward the accuracy of the portrayal of law enforcement in these shows. The independent variable is each television show: *Breaking Bad, Bones, Burn Notice, Criminal Minds, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,*
Dexter, Law & Order, The Mentalist, NCIS, Orange is the New Black, Sons of Anarchy, The Sopranos, Weeds, White Collar, as well as the options Other and I do not watch crime based programs. The dependent variable was the degree in which respondents strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree that the television show accurately portrays law enforcement. Television shows including Breaking Bad, Burn Notice, Dexter, Orange is the New Black, Sons of Anarchy, The Sopranos, and Weeds tend to show law enforcement in a negative way while glorifying crime and criminals. There were 36 participants that watch Breaking Bad, which was the most popular show among participants in this study. The crosstabulation shows that 16.7% strongly disagree, 50% disagree, 30.6% agree and 2.8% strongly agree that Breaking Bad accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 17 participants that watch Burn Notice. The crosstabulation shows that 23.5% strongly disagree, 58.8% disagree, and 17.6% agree that Burn Notice accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 18 participants that watch Dexter. The crosstabulation shows that 5.6% strongly disagree, 55.6% disagree, and 38.9% agree that Dexter accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 22 participants that watch Orange is the New Black. The crosstabulation shows that 22.7% strongly disagree, 54.5% disagree, and 22.7% agree that Orange is the New Black accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 12 participants that watch Sons of Anarchy. The crosstabulation shows that 33.3% strongly disagree, 58.3% disagree, and 8.3% agree that Sons of Anarchy accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 12 participants that watch The Sopranos. The crosstabulation shows that 25% strongly disagree, 50% disagree, and 25% agree that The Sopranos accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 21 participants that watch Weeds. The crosstabulation
shows that 23.8% strongly disagree, 57.1% disagree, 14.3% agree, and 4.8% strongly agree that *Weeds* accurately portrays law enforcement. *Bones, Criminal Minds, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, Law & Order, The Mentalist, NCIS,* and *White Collar* portray law enforcement in a positive way, making the main characters of these shows to be “superhero” type figures that always solve the crime. There were 24 participants that watch *Bones*. The crosstabulation shows that 8.3% strongly disagree, 66.7% disagree, and 25% agree that *Bones* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 27 participants that watch *Criminal Minds*. The crosstabulation shows that 18.5% strongly disagree, 59.3% disagree, 18.5% agree and 3.7% strongly agree that *Criminal Minds* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 24 participants that watch *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. The crosstabulation shows that 16.7% strongly disagree, 62.5% disagree, 16.7% agree and 4.2% strongly agree that *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 32 participants that watch *Law & Order*. The crosstabulation shows that 12.5% strongly disagree, 71.9% disagree, and 15.6% agree that *Law & Order* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 9 participants that watch *The Mentalist*. The crosstabulation shows that 11.1% strongly disagree, 66.7% disagree, and 22.2% agree that *The Mentalist* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 18 participants that watch *NCIS*. The crosstabulation shows that 11.1% strongly disagree, 83.3% disagree, and 5.6% agree that *NCIS* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 12 participants that watch *White Collar*. The crosstabulation shows that 16.7% strongly disagree, 50% disagree, and 33.3% agree that *White Collar* accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 26 participants that watch other fictional crime based programs. The crosstabulation shows that 26.9%
strongly disagree, 38.5% disagree, and 34.6% agree that other fictional crime based programs accurately portrays law enforcement.

The second set of Crosstab analysis crossed each news outlet listed on the survey with attitudes toward the accuracy of the portrayal of law enforcement in these outlets. The independent variable is each news outlet: CNN, Fox News, 60 Minutes, ABC News, MSNBC, HLN, CNBC, as well as the options Other and I do not watch news programs. The dependent variable was the degree in which respondents strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree that news stories on television give an accurate portrayal of law enforcement in their community. News programs including ABC News, CNN, MSNBC, and 60 Minutes are on liberal biased networks, while Fox News and HLN are on the conservative side of the spectrum. There were 26 participants that watch CNN, which was the most popular news program among participants in this study. The crosstabulation shows that 3.8% strongly disagree, 50% disagree, and 46.2% agree that CNN accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 15 participants that watch Fox News. The crosstabulation shows that 60% strongly disagree and 40% agree that Fox News accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 8 participants that watch 60 Minutes. The crosstabulation shows that 12.5% strongly disagree, 50% disagree, and 37.5% agree that 60 Minutes accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 25 participants that watch ABC News. The crosstabulation shows that 44% disagree and 56% agree that ABC News accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 11 participants that watch MSNBC. The crosstabulation shows that 18.2% strongly disagree, 27.3% disagree, and 54.5% agree that MSNBC accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 3 participants that watch
HLN. The crosstabulation shows that 66.7% disagree and 33.3% agree that HLN accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 5 participants that watch CNBC. The crosstabulation shows that 100% disagree that CNBC accurately portrays law enforcement. There were 21 participants that watch other news programs. The crosstabulation shows that 9.5% strongly disagree, 38.1% disagree, and 52.4% agree that other news programs accurately portray law enforcement.

The third set of Crosstab analysis crosses demographic information of the survey participants with reported level of fear of being a victim of crime. The independent variables used for this test were sex and race. The dependent variable was the degree in which, on a scale of 1 to 10, respondents feared they would be a victim of a crime (nonviolent or violent) in their life. On the scale, 1 was no fear and 10 was very fearful. In total there were 74 respondents to this question. Of this total 2 did not identify their sex, 45 were female, and 27 were male. There were 17 females on the scale that chose between numbers 1 and 4 as their level of fear. 11 females were neutral on the scale and 17 chose between numbers 6 and 10 for their level of fear. There were 18 males on the scale that chose between numbers 1 and 4 as their level of fear. 5 males were neutral on the scale and 4 chose between numbers 6 and 10 for their level of fear. The two that did not identify their sex chose a 3 and a 10 as their levels of fear on the scale. There were also a total of 74 respondents that identified their race on the survey. Survey participants were given the option to choose African-American (non-Hispanic/black), Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white), Hispanic, Asian, and other where they could fill in a specific race that they identify with if it was not listed. There were 5 individuals who identified their race to be African-American (non-Hispanic/black). On
the provided scale 3 from the African-American (non-Hispanic/black) group chose between 1 and 4, while 2 chose between 6 and 10. Of those who identified as Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white), 29 respondents chose between 1 and 4 on the scale for their level of fear, 13 chose neutral, and 17 chose between 6 and 10. There was 1 survey respondent that identified as Hispanic. On the scale they were neutral for their level of fear of becoming a victim of crime. From the group of survey participants 5 identified as Asian. There were 2 respondents that chose between 1 and 4 on the scale, 2 chose neutral, and 1 chose a 7 on the scale as their level of fear. The additional races identified were Asian/Hispanic and Lebanese. The Asian/Hispanic respondent chose a 7 on the scale and the Lebanese respondent was neutral for their level of fear of becoming a victim of a crime.

The fourth Crosstab analysis crosses demographic information of the survey participants with attitude toward whether participants believe police officers always look out for the public’s best interest. The independent variables used for this test were sex and race. The dependent variable was the degree in which respondents strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree that police officers put the public’s best interest before their own. Of the total 96 survey participants, 89 responded that they strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree that police officers always look out for the public’s interest before their own. 55 of these respondents were female, 31 were male, and 3 did not identify a sex. For the females, 10 strongly disagree, 21 disagree, 22 agree, and 2 strongly agree that police look out for the public’s best interest before their own. Of the male participants, 3 strongly disagree, 16 disagree, 11 agree, and 1 strongly agree that police look out for the public’s best interest before their own. For
those who did not identify a sex, there were 2 participants that disagree and 1 that agrees that police look out for the public’s best interest before their own. There were also a total of 89 respondents that identified their race on the survey. Again, survey participants were given the option to choose African-American (non-Hispanic/black), Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white), Hispanic, Asian, and other where they could fill in a specific race that they identify with if it was not listed. There were 7 individuals who identified their race to be African-American (non-Hispanic/black). There were 3 individuals that chose strongly disagree and 4 chose that they disagree that police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own. Of the 70 participants who identified as Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white), there were 9 individuals that chose strongly disagree, 29 chose disagree, 29 chose agree, and 3 chose that they disagree that police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own. There were 2 participants that identified themselves as Hispanic. 1 Hispanic respondent strongly disagreed while the other disagreed that police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own. There were 5 people who identified as Asian in the survey and of those 5, 3 disagree that police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own, while the other 2 agree. The additional races identified were Asian/Hispanic and Lebanese. Both the Asian/Hispanic and Lebanese respondents agreed that police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own.

The fifth Crosstab test looked at demographic variables as well as attitudes toward public safety’s necessary involvement. The independent variables used for this test were sex and race. The dependent variable was the degree in which respondents strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree that public safety officers intervene
in necessary situations on campus. Of the total 96 survey participants, 88 responded that they strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. 55 of these respondents were female, 31 were male, and 2 did not identify a sex. For the females, there were no participants who strongly disagree, 9 disagree, 35 agree, and 11 strongly agree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. Of the male participants, 2 strongly disagree, 5 disagree, 21 agree, and 3 strongly agree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. For those who did not identify a sex, the 2 participants agree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. There were also a total of 88 respondents that identified their race on the survey. Survey participants were given the option to choose African-American (non-Hispanic/black), Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white), Hispanic, Asian, and other where they could fill in a specific race that they identify with if it was not listed. There were 7 individuals who identified their race to be African-American (non-Hispanic/black). Of these 7 there were 2 individuals that disagree, 3 that agree, and 2 that strongly agree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. In total, 70 participants identified as Caucasian (non-Hispanic/white). There were 2 individuals that chose strongly disagree, 10 chose disagree, 47 chose agree, and 11 chose that they disagree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. There were 2 participants that identified themselves as Hispanic and both agree that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. There were 5 people who identified as Asian in the survey and of those 5, 1 disagrees, 3 agree, and 1 strongly agrees that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus. The
additional races identified were Asian/Hispanic and Lebanese. Both the Asian/Hispanic and Lebanese respondents agreed that public safety officers intervene in necessary situations on campus.

An Independent Samples t-Test was used to analyze factors outside of the media that may have an impact on student’s attitudes toward law enforcement. The first Independent Samples t-Test compares the means for two samples to understand the relationship between the two variables. For this test the samples included individuals who either do or do not have a family member (immediate or extended) that work in local or federal law enforcement and whether or not participants felt that police officers always put the public’s best interest before their own. No significant difference was found ($t(87) = .244, p > .05$). The mean of the participants believe police officers do look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.33, sd = 0.83$) was not significantly different from the mean of participants that do not believe police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.29, sd = 0.73$).

The second Independent Samples t-test compares the means for two samples, which included individuals who have or have not had a face-to-face interaction with a member of law enforcement and whether or not participants felt that police officers always put the public’s best interest before their own. No significant difference was found ($t(87) = -.703, p > .05$). The mean of the participants believe police officers do look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.28, sd = 0.77$) was not significantly different from the mean of participants that do not believe police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.45, sd = 0.69$).
The third Independent Samples t-test compares the means for the two samples of participants who reported either having been arrested or not and whether or not participants felt that police officers always put the public's best interest before their own. No significant difference was found ($t(87) = -.701, p > .05$). The mean of the participants believe police officers do look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2, sd = 1$) was not significantly different from the mean of participants that do not believe police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.31, sd = 0.76$).

The last Independent Samples t-test compares the means for the two samples of participants who reported either having been a victim of a crime or not and whether or not participants felt that police officers always put the public’s best interest before their own. No significant difference was found ($t(86) = -.701, p > .05$). The mean of the participants believe police officers do look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.32, sd = .95$) was not significantly different from the mean of participants that do not believe police officers look out for the public’s best interest before their own ($m = 2.29, sd = 0.68$).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine if factors such as the media and any real life experience with law enforcement affects the perceptions that college students at Rochester Institute of Technology have toward law enforcement. The first hypothesis in this study stated that if college students watch television shows that portray law enforcement in an unfavorable manner then college students will develop a negative attitude toward law enforcement. To examine this hypothesis Crosstabs testing was
used. The crosstabulations show that for fictional crime shows there is a consistently higher percentage ($\geq 50\%$) of survey participants that disagree with the notion that law enforcement is accurately portrayed in these television shows. This was true for both shows that portray law enforcement in a positive manner and shows that portray law enforcement in a negative manner, which shows that there is little differences in attitudes based on how law enforcement is portrayed. The second hypothesis in this study assumes that if college students are exposed to news on a regular basis then college students will develop a negative attitude toward law enforcement. The same Crosstabs test was used for this hypothesis, but instead of using the fictional crime shows it used the news programs in the test. A high percentage ($\geq 50\%$) of the participants that watch ABC News and MSNBC agreed that these news programs accurately portray law enforcement in their community. Both of these news outlets are considered to be more liberal. There was a higher percentage ($\geq 50\%$) that disagreed that the news outlets accurately portray law enforcement in their community for the remaining news programs. There seems to be slightly more acceptance with what is reported by more liberal biased news outlets. The two hypotheses also assume that if college students do not have any real life experience with law enforcement then they will have an unfavorable attitude toward law enforcement. A Crosstabs test that included demographics of sex as well as race and whether or not the individual believes police officers always look out for the public’s best interest before their own concludes that from this sample that females closely disagree and agree with this statement. The same is true for male participants in this study. Those who identified as African-American (non-Hispanic/black) and Hispanic strictly strongly disagree and disagree that
police officers always put the public’s best interest before their own. All other identified races closely disagree and agree that police officers always put the public’s best interest before their own. Of those who said they had been a victim of crime, there were a higher number of those who agreed that law enforcement was helpful during the investigation however, they closely strongly disagreed and disagreed that law enforcement was successful in the investigation of the crime they were a victim of. Despite being seen as helpful law enforcement did not manage to be seen as successful at their job. Each Independent Samples t-test that was run concluded to have results that were not significant.

Exposure to this study did not establish a significant relationship between television media outlets along with real life experience with law enforcement and student attitudes toward law enforcement figures. There may be several possible explanations for these findings, one being that students simply regard such media outlets as entertainment with little significance in the development of their attitudes toward various law enforcement figures. This study was successful in examining the differencing in viewing of crime based television shows and news outlets by a student population rather than by the public as a whole. Since this was a quantitative study, it did not observe specific attitudes toward various fictional crime shows and news outlets nor did it examine individual effects from each student’s personal experience with crime or law enforcement.

There are many suggestions to be made for future research in this field of study. It would be beneficial for future research to involve various media outlets, not simply television, and the way that the material is presented via these outlets. It is possible
that each media outlet has a different influence level toward the student population. Looking into specific fictional crime shows and news outlets may also prove to be beneficial. Knowing more about what student’s pay attention to when watching and relate to may help the researcher understand the complexity of this medium’s influence. Limiting the pool of television shows and news programs in the survey may have affected the results so it would be important for future research allow questions about what specifically is being watch to be filled in by each participant. Furthermore, if it is possible to get a wider range of participants with various demographics such as age, race, and education level there may be an improved representation of a student population. Law enforcement figures themselves may be added into a separate sample population. Testing their attitudes towards the student populace as well as their opinions on how the media portrays the field of law enforcement would create a more holistic understanding of the development of attitudes that students have toward law enforcement figures. Comparing the opinions that law enforcement figures have toward one another as well as students would make for an interesting conclusion to a study. Certain members of law enforcement often only work with a small part of the field so it is possible that their attitudes too are influenced about other law enforcement professionals by factors such as the media and real life experience that have with other members of law enforcement.
References:


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