

Undergraduate Thesis Prospectus

Programming Public Safety: A Script to Help Save Lives

(technical research project in Computer Science)

Polarizing Police: America's Relationship with Law Enforcement

(sociotechnical research project)

by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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General Research Problem

How may law enforcement most effectively pursue its mission?

Law enforcement is a critical part of citizen safety in any nation. For law enforcement to best provide for the constituents it serves, it needs to be trained and equipped properly to best suit the needs it's there to serve. Law enforcement needs the correct physical equipment to fulfill its mission, but more importantly, be socially equipped to handle diverse situations in the best possible manner. Police in 2018 had contact with 61.5 million people, consisting of almost even dispersions of roughly 20% of Whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and other ethnicities (Harrell & Davis, 2023). Law enforcement is not just about radios, handcuffs, and tasers, but also about dealing with people from different backgrounds in different situations. Equipping our officers with both physical and social tools will allow them to be the most effective for our communities.

Professional Value Gained during my Internship Experience

What lesson of lasting professional value did I learn from my internship experience at L3Harris?

I am currently not enrolled in CS 4991, but I plan to enroll in the Spring and write about my internship experience this past summer at L3Harris. During my internship, I was involved as a team member working on the back end of the radio network system where I created a configuration tool for the construction of new radio towers. Working along with one team member, we created a script that read in configuration files and programmatically updated the towers configuration in accordance with the sheet. This turned a 2-3-week job, into a 2-3-day job which could now be done simultaneously on many towers by a single person, increasing the efficiency in the deployment of new radio tower systems.

Polarizing Police: America's Relationship with Law Enforcement

In the US, how have both the critics and allies of law enforcement polarized public perceptions of it since 2012?

How has the public perception of law enforcement changed in the United States? Since the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, perception of law enforcement has become a divisive topic in the United States. Since this point, Americans have questioned the efficacy and the existence of inherent problems rooted in law enforcement, including racism (Thomas & Blackmon, 2014), while others have defended and affirmed the efficacy of law enforcement. This disparity has been exacerbated by all forms of media that exist in current times, whether that be social or mainstream media. Media can overshadow many that lie in the middle of this issue, in which they both believe in the efficacy of law enforcement but want reform in certain aspects of how policing is currently handled in America.

Researchers have investigated the dynamic relationship between the critics and allies of law enforcement, and how the dynamics of that relationship have led to increased polarization between the groups. Boudreau, Mackenzie, and Simmons (2022) investigated the Black Lives Matter movements effect on the support for reforms in law enforcement, and found that the reforms themselves didn't polarize people, as they found a bipartisan majority in support of reform, but information about groups that are pro / anti the proposals tended to polarize the respondent's perspective of the groups. They found that partisanship and signaling from elites played a significant role in shaping public opinion and they hypothesized that while not strictly partisan, that Democrats would tend to favor reforms more than Republicans, and that people would support reforms or not based on the partisan relationship of the group advocating for the

reform. They identified the relationship of the polarization and how it shapes people's opinion on reform, but not how it got to where these groups and their political affiliations impact how people will make decisions about law enforcement and polarize each other with their support / opposition of law enforcement, along with how those who are in the middle shape the relationship.

This issue spans across many groups, including those who are critical of law enforcement, those who support law enforcement, those who support law enforcement but see inherent issues and want reform, and the media. While the problem presents itself as binary, it is a vast spectrum between the two groups, wherein many groups lie between which there are many different feelings about the inherent issues, or lack thereof in law enforcement, along with the amount of change that it may necessitate. Media may align with each of these groups or serve as an intermediary where these groups interact upon these issues.

Black Lives Matter is a leading participant as a critic of law enforcement in America today having recently called out law enforcement and the justice system, advocating for reform and even total disbandment (Black Lives Matter, 2023). Black Lives Matter has stated, "we cannot reform an institution built upon white supremacy. We need a new, radical approach to public safety and community investment," expressing their distrust in law enforcement and their belief of racial disparity in the justice system (Black Lives Matter, 2021). Since its inception, many chapters across America have been founded to push for reform in their local departments and advocate for social justice in their communities. They strive for race equity across America, especially in policing, where they have driven to eliminate biases from officers by advocating for body worn cameras, bias trainings, and the ban of no-knock warrants, reshaping the way law enforcement operates in modern America (Ray et al., 2022). Nadal et. al. (2017), found that

black Americans were more likely to have negative perceptions and interactions with police than those of White or Asian descent, which corresponds with the sentiment of unequal policing behind the Black Lives Matter movement.

Blue Lives Matter has been a key movement in the affirmation of current law enforcement practices. Founded after the killings of officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu in New York City, and as a direct response to Black Lives Matter, the movement has garnered support across America, supporting and affirming law enforcement that is seen to be under attack through a mainstream anti-police bias (Blue Lives Matter, 2017). Blue Lives Matter is an unorganized group, in that there is no official CEO and structure of the group, but rather a movement that many individuals, both citizens and law enforcement officers, stand behind and promote the same ideas. Blue Lives Matter affirms the way modern policing is performed and stands behind the backlash that many current departments face from the different reform advocacy groups.

Between those who want complete reform or even disbandment, and those who completely defend police, lies a group of people who are firm supporters of police, but also believe there is some reform that is necessary to further the efficacy of policing in America. Police unions may fall into this group, where they are composed of law enforcement, but organize to constitute reform in their department. In St. Louis, black officers organized to find the Ethical Society of Police to address what they believe to be racism inside the force (ESOP, n.d.). The Ethical Society of Police's mission is to, "work to cultivate and maintain police/community relations, increase diversity within police departments, and enhance accountability and professionalism in law enforcement," showing both their support of law enforcement, but alignment with some of the reform groups in the necessity for change. Groups

like the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) have organized to promote the well-being of officers through their funding of law enforcement and support of their families, but they also advocate for reforms like body camera use and removal of stop and frisk procedures in departments (Leap 2021). LEAP wants to, “abolish the laws and practices that pit the police against the community,” showing that they affirm the mission of law enforcement but understand that people do not trust law enforcement right now in America and believe that change is needed (Leap 2021). LEAP is a leading group that can show that law enforcement can both be supported by those in the community and within the department, but also make the reforms that they believe will make their department more equitable for all.

Media has been both a driving force in the conversation about law enforcement along with the polarization of the sides of the conversation. Media can be broken down into two groups: mainstream media and social media. Mainstream media in modern America is often seen as having a narrative for or against certain issues. News organizations like Newsmax describe themselves as “offer[ing] independent news with a conservative perspective,” (Newsmax, n.d.) while other organizations like MSNBC tend to be viewed as more liberal organizations with a separate and opposing agenda (All Sides, 2023). Because of opposing narratives, Americans are being fed more divisive information about law enforcement from both sides of mainstream media, driving division on opinions between groups (Klepper, 2023). Kleinfeld (2021) found that police aligned with both parties, but after the protests of summer 2020, law enforcement leaned heavily towards the Republican party, leading them to further deepen their relation into polarization and partisanship, adding to the tension between groups. The way that media can portray a story to align to certain partisan views allows law enforcement to be grouped into the

partisan divide. Having different agendas with the same stories, can drive groups to cling on to the narrative that best fits their own agenda, further driving opinions in groups apart.

Media can also act as an intermediary for discussion among participant groups. Social media has been an essential tool for sharing opinions and promoting advocacy in the modern world. It has allowed individuals to share what they directly see and expand discussion around topics in what is meant to be a narrative free forum where all sides can be represented equally. Media in this sense can be a place where opinions may drive people apart, but discussion in these forums may allow people to find common ground and decrease tensions among opposing viewpoints. Overgaard and Wooley (2022) found that social media may amplify your own narrative through recommendation algorithms, but also allow reduction in polarization through interaction with others from your “social outgroup”.

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