

# **Polarizing Police: America's Relationship with Law Enforcement**

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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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The United States has had an evolving relationship with law enforcement for many decades. Following the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, critics of policing formed the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement has been controversial, and many of its opponents formed counter movements. The consequence is a deep divide over law enforcement in the US. Questions about the efficacy of law enforcement along with inherent problems rooted in law enforcement, including racism (Thomas & Blackmon, 2014) have been countered by those who defend and affirm the efficacy of law enforcement. Law enforcement in the US has always been controversial, but over the last decade the debates have grown even more divisive. In the US, how have both the critics and allies of law enforcement polarized public perceptions of it since 2012? Three primary factors explain the greater polarization. First, both critics and allies of law enforcement have made social media their major means of communication, and the algorithms of the leading media platforms promote confirmation bias and generate divisive echo chambers. Second, participants in the debate tend to interpret bodycam video differently; critics often treat it as definitive and final even in the absence of context that defenders of law enforcement consider essential. Finally, even mainstream media channels have found advantage adopting more ideologically distinct positions than were typical of the broadcast networks of decades ago.

This issue spans across many groups, including those who are critical of law enforcement, those who support law enforcement as it is, those who support law enforcement but call for reform, and the media, both social and mainstream. The problem presents itself as a binary, but is a vast spectrum between the groups, wherein many groups lie between where they can have vastly different feelings about inherent issues rooted in law enforcement or a lack thereof, along with the amount of change it may necessitate.

## Review of Research

Research has been conducted on the dynamic relationship between the critics and allies of law enforcement, and how these dynamics have led to increased polarization between the groups. Partisanship is one of the major dynamics of the relationships between the groups and is often a linking factor of those inside each of their respective groups. Boudreau, Mackenzie, and Simmons (2022) researched the Black Lives Matter movements effect on the support of reforms in law enforcement. They found that reforms didn't polarize people, but rather a bipartisan majority in support of reform, but that information about groups that are either for the reforms or against the reform, tended to polarize the respondent's perspectives of the groups. They also found that partisan signaling from elites also played a significant role in shaping public opinion, in which they hypothesized that while it was not strictly partisan, Democrats tended to favor reforms more than Republicans and people would support the reforms based on the group that was advocating for those reforms. While the relationship of polarization and its shaping of people's opinion on reform was identified, it was not found how the groups and their political affiliations impact how people will make decision about their views on law enforcement and how they may interact with one another due to their support / opposition and how those who are in the middle will shape the relationship.

Research has also been done about the impacts of social media and how it can shape opinions and behaviors. Äijälä et al. (2023) studied these impacts on Finnish people, particularly focusing on adolescents, which they described their core focus on those in their senior year of high school. In this study, they identified some of the greatest threats presented by the impact of social media were disinformation and polarization. They defined disinformation as "intentionally shared false information" and described it often being planned and targeted to certain individuals

to maximize its effect. They described the polarization as stemming from “filter bubbles” in which people get fragmented information in which is algorithmically chosen to reduce the amount of information that conflicts with the user’s previous beliefs. With the very apparent social media impact on information gathered and political divide that can arise from it, there are many implications and areas that this can impact, including the way that the public can view law enforcement. The ability for social media to have this significance in the way that people think, make it a key part in understanding many of the cultural divides that we have today, and allow it to be a driving force in this divide when it is used in the wrong way.

## Social Media Echo Chambers

Social media plays a large part in the way that Americans consume information today and how they interact with one another. Because of this, some of the key voices in the discussion about law enforcement today take to social media to promote their views and share their ideas with the rest of the world. Some of the leading voices from all sides of the discussion include Black Lives Matter, the Blue Lives Matter movement, and more official groups like the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) and the Ethical Society of Police (ESOP). With all these groups interacting within the same medium paired with the “filter bubbles” that exist in social media, it can lead to self-gratification in media choices which is followed by divisive interaction when opposing groups interact.

One of the most apparent causes of polarization between people today in their views in law enforcement is the drastic disparity between the two leading groups on opposite ends of the spectrum. Black Lives Matter is a leading participant as a critic of law enforcement, calling out both law enforcement and the justice system, advocating for both 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 creation after the killing of Trayvon Martin, local chapters across America have pushed for reform in their local departments and social justice in their communities. These sentiments reflected greatly with black American’s who were more likely to have negative perceptions of police than those of white or Asian decent (Nadal et. al, 2017). In stark contrast to these ideals, the Blue Lives Matter movement was a direct counter to the Black Lives Matter movement, founded after the killings of officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu in New York City. This movement was founded on the ideals of affirming current law enforcement that seemed to be under attack through media driven anti-police bias (Blue Lives Matter, 2017). Fundamentally these groups represent the two ends of the spectrum of law enforcement perception in America, with key differences ranging from their support or lack thereof for law enforcement along with the need or not for reform. During the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter swept across America with protests happening in every major city with calls for reform, defunding, and even disbandment of law enforcement agencies in their cities (Kesslen, 2020). While there was no direct counter protest, the Blue Lives Matter movement arose online in direct opposition to these protests, with many joining together in support of law enforcement with symbolic imagery such as the “Thin Blue Line” to make their support known (Fig.1). With these fundamental differences existing between the groups, there already existed a polarizing nature when distinguishing oneself between these groups and the perception that one would have when viewing the opposing group.



Figure 1. Thin Blue Line Flag (Thin Blue Line Flag (United States), 2016)

With a stark contrast between the two ends of the spectrum of law enforcement views, there is an opening for alienation of those who reside in the middle, which alienates and further exacerbates the divide in views between groups. In St. Louis, black officers organized the Ethical Society of Police (ESOP) 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. Another group, the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) lies in the middle of this spectrum with similar values to that of ESOP. 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). Both groups separate themselves from both Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter in what can be a divisive way. Because these groups both have opinions that neither group would support, particularly reform for Blue Lives Matter and law enforcement affirmation from Black Lives Matter, it leaves them in an awkward middle area where they belong to neither and could increase the gap between the ends of the spectrum.

As found by Äijälä et al. (2023), social media serves as an echo chamber, with your “filter bubble” influencing what you see. These algorithms that produce this “filter bubble” will feed information that aligns with users interests and beliefs and isolate users away from information that doesn’t align with their interests and beliefs. Cinelli et. al. (2021) found “bias in information diffusion toward like-minded peers”, and with information being isolated toward groups of like-minded people, it doesn’t allow information to easily reach the other sides and for groups to interact and facilitate discussion. Blue Lives Matter has been a movement driven by social media from law enforcement supporting individuals while Black Lives Matter stated their main goal as “participating in meaningful dialogue with our base and allies on social media” showing their drive to utilize social media to further their agenda (Bhambhani, 2022). Overgaard and Wooley (2022) examined that for decades, interaction with ones “social outgroup”, being those who they disagree with, tended to come to view that outgroup in a more favorable light. The creation of the social media echo chamber has made the interaction with ones “social outgroup” much more difficult if not impossible, and as groups drive their messages on social media platforms, the lack of interaction with the “social outgroup” will continue to grow the divide.

## Context and Disinformation

In an era of growing distrust in media and disinformation, contextual information is more important than it’s ever been. In recent years, there has been a rise in using social media as a tool in activism, especially when it came to injustices performed by law enforcement. The emergence of video and body camera footage on social media has driven issues due to lack of contextual information around the situations. This is important as media is supposed to act as an intermediary for discussion, and when this is ignored, it can become a driver of polarization.

This issue was first highlighted by the recordings of the death of George Floyd in 2020. These videos caused a massive uprising of protests throughout the summer of 2020, but there was often an argument made that there was loss of context in this case, specifically what Mr. Floyd had done before his encounter with the police, and how often they tried to get him to comply before his death. While wrongdoing was found in this case, it doesn't mean the contextual evidence before the video started was not important, as the media tried to portray the officers as immediately kneeling and killing Mr. Floyd, when in fact they tried many times, unsuccessfully, to get Mr. Floyd on the car as he fought against them (Groves, 2021). Having this contextual evidence presented doesn't nullify the injustice performed, but understanding the full story paints a much different picture than just a short video of his death. Black Lives Matter advocated for the use of body worn cameras for all law enforcement in America after this incident to increase accountability of law enforcement (Ray et. al, 2022). Law enforcement welcomed the cameras as an "extra set of eyes" to protect them legally, but they expressed concern that the footage captured would "focus on a few rogue cops" and spreading discrediting footage would harm the public perception of them (Lindquist, 2022). Sommers (2016) found that the biases for or against police remained regardless of the type of evidence presented, validating law enforcements concerns about body camera's inability for improving perceptions.

One of social media's goals when created was to be an intermediary for conversation among individuals but it has also become a key component for sharing opinions with others and promoting advocacy among interest groups. Chalmers and Shotton (2015) examined how interest groups strategized on social media to promote civic engagement and voter turnout. They asserted that social media "needs to be understood as part of an interest organization's larger set of news media lobbying strategies." It is noted that social media has created what some have called



“clicktivists”, people who support activism on social media, but do not garner real ground support. Even with a lack of support on the ground from those who are “clicktivists”, the impacts that it has in pushing an agenda has a real effect on the public’s view of a certain topic.

Boulianne (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of civic participation and found that social media use was a positive factor in driving one’s civic engagement. Black Lives Matter did the “Black Tuesday” in June 2020, where users posted a black square on their social media accounts with the group’s name as the tag to promote their interests (Wellman, 2022). Blue Lives Matter was able to garner support in the same way in response through the spreading of images of the thin blue line allowing people to show their support of law enforcement in opposition to Black Lives Matter(Fig. 1). The ability for groups like Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter to gather support through social media has a profound impact in the strength of the interest groups.

With social media being a medium in which these groups can drive their agenda to the public, its intentional purpose as a medium for conversation, can quickly become negative through the perpetuation of disinformation. Black Lives Matter dealt with false reports of beating elderly people and claims of them being categorized as a terrorist group by the government (Corley, 2021). In this same time, law enforcement and its supporters dealt with claims of an epidemic of racially motivated shootings against minority groups, specifically blacks (Donald, 2016). Both groups have acted against disinformation about their respective views, with Black Lives Matter acting against what they believe to be disinformation about them, while opposition like conservative Mike Gonzalez consider them to be “the spreaders of disinformation”. Black Lives Matter spokesperson Jordan Giger said the disinformation spread can “build this violent narrative around BLM” which will drive supporters away (Corely, 2021). When groups like Black Lives Matter or when Blue Lives Matter deal with disinformation that tarnishes their

reputation and the message that they support, it can drive people away and create false opinions of the respective group.

## Mainstream Media Polarization

Mainstream media has been a leading voice in the national conversation about law enforcement, and a focal point of discussion about polarization in America. We are a time where news feels more widespread and divisive than ever before. Media outlets now favor certain viewpoints and are broadcasting 24 hours a day, not wasting one second of time to output a message. With the change of news broadcasting and its message, it has become a driver of polarization in the discussion about law enforcement in America.

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). With news outlets giving options to people for news suited to specific political views, they can set specific agendas that align with their viewers, further spreading those who don’t agree apart. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found evidence of an agenda setting function of the mainstream media through the analysis of voter key issues in Chapel Hill, and those that the media had emphasized during an election campaign. They found correlation of voter views and those that were pushed by the media, and while it isn’t explicit evidence, the correlation corresponds with what would be found should that influence exist. News media can push their agenda to influence public views on issues. Headlines from Fox and CNN covering the same story of protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin with different headlines convey different message that elicit diverse emotions and drive people toward a particular agenda (Fig 2 & 3).

Graziano and Gauthier (2018) found that cultivation theory, the theory that “worldviews are shaped by the content of the media consumers are exposed to” can be manipulated by news organizations favoring a certain agenda. When agendas of news organizations favor positive or negative depictions of law enforcement in their coverage, it can impact the perceptions that their viewers have of them.



Figure 2. Fox News headline about the Kenosha Riots (Elfrink, 2020)



Figure 3. CNN headline about the Kenosha Riots (Wulfsohn, 2020)

The influence of mainstream media on the daily lives of Americans has undergone a significant transformation. News used to come from the local media, either the newspaper or your local news channel, where they had time for the story to develop before reporting. Then came along CNN which took off in popularity during the Gulf War in 1991, where hours of live footage captivated America and changed the news media model forever (Logan, 2000). Gordon (2022) analyzed how Americans felt about mainstream media before and after the creation of the 24-hour news cycle and found a correlation in its creation and American's distrust with the media. There existed a sharp contrast between Democrats and Republicans, specifically those sources that Republicans trusted, Democrats did not, and vice versa. She concluded this sharp contrast from findings from the 1980's where viewpoints and media trust was much more neutral and aligned, that the 24-hour news cycle had influenced this divide. The creation of this 24-hour news cycle has also impacted the quality of the news that is being produced. Lewis and Cushion (2009) concluded that the push for news organizations to cover the latest breaking story had

diminished the quality of the reporting along with constant running of “breaking news” on the channels, tainting its true meaning. The loss of quality and growing distrust of the mainstream media has large implications when these outlets are reporting on law enforcement and their opposition.

Mainstream media networks have become a key component of conversation about polarization in America by emphasizing divisive stories including those about law enforcement. Because of opposing narratives from news organizations, Americans are being fed more divisive information about law enforcement from both sides of mainstream media, driving division on opinions between groups (Klepper, 2023). Outlets like CNN run stories with the headlines “Tens of thousands march in largest George Floyd protests” while Fox ran headlines like “US protests: More riots and lawlessness in cities across nation” (Chavez et. al, 2020; Calicchio, 2020). Between the differing narratives and the controversial nature of the stories belonging to these headlines, people can get different impressions just when looking at the difference between words like protest and riot, where the protests show meaningful action against the wrongdoing of law enforcement versus riots discredit those who marched in opposition of law enforcement. This also applies to the Breonna Taylor shooting, where Fox ran headlines of the “Breonna Taylor’s death” versus CNN’s “Breonna Taylor’s killing” (Pagones, 2020; Waldrop et. al, 2020). Again, the difference between a death and killing lays responsibility in different places for the loss of life, and in sensational stories like these, they can convey strong emotions in their viewers. Mainstream media’s ability to run divisive, emotion provoking stories, combined with skewing toward their narrative and 24-hour coverage, can drive people apart in their perceptions of law enforcement.

## Conclusion

The increased polarization of America's view of law enforcement is shaped by many groups on many fronts. Social and mainstream media lead the front on the growing divide of both individual opinions and those of their respective groups. The idea of driven polarization through these mediums does not only apply to law enforcement, but from anything as simple as political affiliation to the views about vaccinations that were had during the Covid pandemic. Stark divides in views were driven both in social media spaces but also through mainstream media headlines and had very similar effects on people as division on law enforcement did. How should the United States solve the division issue? For law enforcement, the key is getting out to the people in the community and develop trust with them personally, instead of letting media drive the notions of police in your locality. Sheriff Whit Clark III of the Campbell County Sheriff's Office in Virginia has enacted a "community policing" campaign to tackle this issue. He has led with the motto "we are a part of the community, not apart" and has reinstated the community advisory board, where citizens can directly communicate with the sheriff and advise on issues across the entire agency and voice concerns as a representative for the community, creating a direct relationship between the community and law enforcement (Campbell County, n.d). If law enforcement across America takes steps like this, there can be trust developed with those who oppose law enforcement, garnering support from all sides, and beginning to end the divide.

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