

From Superhero to Human: A Genealogical Criticism of Depictions of Police Officers in Media  
from the 1970s to the Present

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Abstract

This senior project suggests that media depictions of law enforcement encourage viewers to adopt certain viewpoints towards police officers. In addition, the more realistic and humanizing that these presentations become, the more positive that the general public's perceptions of police officers become. By utilizing a genealogical criticism of eight different law enforcement movies, and with support from public opinion polls and the communication theory of Cultivation, this paper will exemplify how the above statement is true.

From Superhero to Human: A Genealogical Criticism of Depictions of Police Officers in Media  
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In 1977, only 37% of Americans polled had a “high” or “very high” rating of police honesty and ethics according to a poll by *The Gallup Report* (University at Albany). Since the 1970s this number has increased and it seems that more Americans have faith in law enforcement officers. The most recent poll taken by *The Gallup Report* in 2012 showed that of the Americans polled, 58% gave a “high” or “very high” rating of police, while only 10% gave a “low” or “very low” rating. While views of police officers have been getting more positive, still just over half the population rates them as “high” or “very high,” with 40% only rating police as “average.” The increase in positive perceptions of law enforcement suggests that media depictions of them seen since the 1970s have presented a positive shift from the “superhero” police officer to a more realistic version. This more humanizing approach to depictions of law enforcement in media contributes to more positive public opinions of police officers. Through analysis of eight different law enforcement movies from the 1970s to the present time this paper suggests that movies invite viewers to adopt certain viewpoints towards police officers.

In this project I will evaluate how the media has constructed police officers from the 1970s to the present day. To do this I will use a genealogical criticism to track how constructions of law enforcement officers in movies has evolved over time. I chose to start in the 1970s because the movie *Dirty Harry* was a significant contribution to the popularization of the police officer genre of movies. While this movie laid the groundwork for more similar movies, it still lacks the amount of accuracy and realness that is seen in more recent movies such as *End of Watch*. I am taking a genealogical approach to this project so that I can map out how police officer portrayals have become more accurate over the years and how these media constructions have influenced more positive public opinions over time. Each decade has seen different

depictions of law enforcement, and each decade can give useful insight into how the evolution of the police officer genre has influenced our opinions of police officers over the years.

### Police Officers in Media

The study of how media influences our views is not new. This topic has been widely discussed as the use of different types of media has expanded over the years. It has been found that the consumption of media which portrays people in a certain way will lead to the adoption of those beliefs in the consumers. Cultivation “refers to the long-term formation of perceptions and beliefs about the world as a result of exposure to the media” (Potter). Not only do media lead to the adoption of beliefs, but at a very core level they shape how we view everything around us. In the book *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, Douglas Kellner argues, “Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (9). Not only do these media constructions give us our core values, but Kellner goes on to say that “media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture” (9). Along with how media construct certain views in the audience, I also want to study the different depictions of law enforcement seen in media. The way that police officers have been constructed in the media play a large role in how the members of society feel about them.

It is important to study how media influence our opinions because it can show us how much power the media we consume can have over us. Not only could media construct how we view law enforcement, they could even influence us enough to give us constructions of how we should treat police officers in our daily lives. When audiences consume media that portray police

officers as people who just want to give out tickets and do no good, it could influence society to believe that this is the truth about all people in law enforcement. While I admit that there are those kinds of police officers out there, there are also some who are trying to do good. If people only watch these movies and never talk to police officers for themselves they will keep these views of law enforcement.

The reason I am focusing on how media constructs certain views of law enforcement is because police officers often go unrecognized for the work they do to keep us all safe. We very often thank those who fight in the military without ever recognizing those who fight at home to keep us safe from the danger within our own country. How did we come to the point where we find it more dangerous, or more courageous, to be in the military than a part of law enforcement? Police officers also risk their lives to keep their community safe. Part of our constructions about it being less important to be a police officer comes from the media. The movies that do not show what it is really like to be in law enforcement discredit what they do on a daily basis to serve the people in their community.

The final reason I want to study law enforcement is because I am planning to join when I graduate. This directly relates to my future career as a police officer. The information I gather through this research could be beneficial in my job as a law enforcement officer because I will know how media have constructed my role in society. I also plan to use information that I obtain through my hiring process to further inform this paper. Another reason I mention my future in law enforcement is to make readers aware of any biases that I may hold towards this topic.

#### Genealogy/Cultural Studies Approach

The method that will be used to study how police movies invite audiences to adopt specific constructions of law enforcement officers will be a genealogical criticism informed by a Cultural Studies perspective. A genealogical criticism involves looking at the way something has evolved or changed over time, while Cultural Studies deals with the ways that media portray specific groups and how this influences public perceptions of those groups. I will be looking at the ways that movies involving police officers have evolved from the 1970s to the present year, along with how the perceptions presented in those movies have influenced public opinions of them.

In *Power/Knowledge*, Michael Foucault described the term genealogy. He wrote, “Let us give the term *genealogy* to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today” (Foucault 83). This perspective is typically used to look at history and how certain aspects or topics have changed and evolved over time. When it comes to media portrayal of law enforcement, a genealogical criticism will be useful in studying police movies over time. The time span I have chosen to study is the 1970s to the most recently successful police movie, *End of Watch*, released in 2012. The difference in portrayals of police officers from the 1970s to now has slowly changed over the years. When looking at a movie, or multiple movies from each decade, it is possible to find similarities within each decade as well as changes from one decade to the next.

A Cultural Studies perspective involves multiple approaches to studying culture and society. In *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, Douglas Kellner explains that this approach came out of a group from the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. He also states that these studies from Birmingham “were among the first to study the effects of

newspapers, television, film, and other popular cultural forms on audiences” (10). Not only does a Cultural Studies perspective examine a culture and society, Kellner says it also “attacks sexism, racism, or bias against specific groups, and criticizes texts that promote any kind of domination or oppression” (18). This aspect of the approach will aid in my study of media constructions of law enforcement officers. I will look at how the specific group of police officers are portrayed in media and how those portrayals promote specific kinds bias towards them.

This senior project will examine eight different movies and the depictions of police officers presented to audiences in each. In the 1970s, police movies were more about the masculine superhero cops. For example, the 1971 movie, *Dirty Harry*, follows a San Francisco police inspector named Harry Callahan as he tracks down a crazed serial killer. The 1980s added a more comedic feel to cop movies with the release of *Dragnet* (1987), *Police Academy* (1984), and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984). These movies feature mismatched partners and misfits as they go through the academy or solve cases together. The comedic aspect of these movies make them less about what law enforcement officers do, and more about how they can use police situations to make an audience laugh. In the 1990s a more serious side in police officer movies was introduced with *Cop Land* (1997), and *Bad Boys* (1995). The 1990s also see a strong female lead as a police officer in the movie *Fargo* (1996). Recently, there have been more realistic and accurate police officer movies being released. The movie *Training Day* (2001) follows a Los Angeles Detective as he trains a rookie officer. While the lead character in this movie turns out to be dirty, the events that transpire are more realistic than seen in years prior. In 2012 the most realistic cop movie to date was released, *End of Watch*. This movie follows two partners on the job as Los Angeles Police Department officers. Situations they are put into in the movie are based on actual scenarios that real life LAPD partners have seen. Because of the director’s

research into the LAPD and basing much of the movie on real situations, *End of Watch* has a more realistic feeling than any movies released before it.

All of these movies offer many different constructions of law enforcement and give society different aspects of police officers to form biases around. Each of the movies I will study for this senior project have given their own contribution to the views that society holds of law enforcement officers. If an individual was more interested in media in the 1970s he or she may see law enforcement officers as the superheroes of today. Just as someone who was watching police officer movies in the 1980s could view law enforcement as misfits who can not even do their job correctly. The movies in the 1980s may have made the officers seem incompetent for the purpose of getting laughs, while leaving the audience feeling that the police can not do their job. Those that consumed media in the 1990s may see the more serious and dramatic side of law enforcement and think that it all is true without realizing that it is not yet completely accurate. People who recently became interested in media surrounding police officers as of the 2000s should have the most accurate perceptions of law enforcement compared to those who were more consumed with media in the years prior.

### Analysis

#### *The “Superhero” Police Officer*

In the 1970s the typical law enforcement movie featured an overdramatized “superhero” police officer. These types of movies feature a strong male lead who is portrayed as the good guy who always wins in the end. This type of police officer may not always follow the rules, but they will always get results and solve the crimes.

An example of this comes from the 1971 movie *Dirty Harry*, directed by Don Siegel. The lead character in this movie, Harry (Clint Eastwood), is a San Francisco detective. Harry is

tasked with finding the “Scorpio Killer” (Andrew Robinson), a person who is going through the city killing many people and leaving clues to who they will kill next. This movie is a “cops and killers” type of movie, with the “superhero” police officer chasing after the psychotic serial killer. Even though Inspector Callahan is never seen practicing his shot in *Dirty Harry*, he is great at using his skills in high intensity situations. In the sequel to *Dirty Harry*, *Magnum Force* (1973), Harry is seen in the shooting range putting other police officers to shame. Showing that not only can Inspector Callahan use his skills in intense situations, he can also use them in a shooting range. Just three years after *Dirty Harry* there is still a “superhero” type police officer trend in the genre of law enforcement films. There went on to be four follow up movies based on Inspector Callahan all of them depicting him as the “superhero” police officer.

In a scene of *Dirty Harry* Inspector Callahan is eating at a diner when he sees a bank robbery in progress. He goes in as the “superhero” and kills two of the bank robbers. As one more robber reaches for a loaded shotgun, Harry gives one of the most famous lines in movie history: “I know what you’re thinking: ‘Did he fire six shots or only five?’ Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement, I’ve kinda lost track myself. But being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you’ve got to ask yourself one question: ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Well, do ya, punk?” This is an example of a “superhero” going into a crime scene, without calling for backup, just to keep the people in the city safe. He was not called into the bank robbery, yet he ran in and took control of the situation. In the 1970s, portrayals of the police officers showed that they did not need to be told to do their job, they saw crime and they took care of it.

This line used in the bank robbery scene is then reused at the end of the film when Inspector Callahan is fighting with the “Scorpio Killer.” Callahan has already injured the killer in

a fight and reuses the same speech that he gave to the bank robber as he is about to kill the “Scorpio Killer.” This scene demonstrates how the police officers portrayed in the 1970s did not always follow the rules. Some could say that Inspector Callahan should have arrested the “Scorpio Killer” and had him put in prison. However, it could also be argued that if Inspector Callahan had done so the justice system would have failed the people in the city and not kept the serial killer off the streets for long. In the end, Callahan shoots and kills the “Scorpio Killer,” then throws his badge into the river.

Even though Inspector Callahan solved the case of the “Scorpio Killer,” and got rid of him for good, the general public may not be supportive of this type of police work. As I mentioned earlier, only 37% of Americans polled had a “high” or “very high” rating of police honesty and ethics in 1977 according to a poll by *The Gallup Report* (University at Albany). This could show a correlation between media portrayal of police officers, like that seen in *Dirty Harry*, and public opinion of law enforcement officers. It could also have to do with police officers acting as vigilantes in the 1970s. On May seventh of 1970 “Seattle Police Department deployed plainclothes officers as ‘vigilantes’ to assault citizens in an effort to quell unrest in the University District” (HistoryLink.org). David Wilma, someone who was there for this event goes on to give his first hand account of what happened in Seattle on that day. He says, “In spite of the rocks and bottles and burning trash cans in the U District, things on campus were pretty tame. Later that evening we got reports on the radio that vigilantes were beating people in the area.” Wilma would later find out that the vigilantes were being used to “indiscriminately beat people” and as far as he knew it was “never investigated by the press or the City of Seattle.” It is events like this being brushed under the rug that could cause viewers of *Dirty Harry* to see the movie negatively because they may be seeing it happening in real life.

While the “superhero” police officer of the 1970s may have led viewers to have a certain perception of law enforcement, the 1980s brought new depictions of police officers to media. With a few steps taken away from the “superhero” police officer, there was a more comedic trend seen in law enforcement movies. These movies suggest a comedic view of law enforcement officers that give viewers a different idea about police officers than did *Dirty Harry*.

### *The Comedic Police Officer*

The 1980s saw law enforcement movies take on a more humorous aspect on average. Each movie utilized a unique style and way of portraying police officers, while maintaining an underlying aspect of comedy that was apparent in each movie in one way or another.

The 1984 movie, *Police Academy*, was directed by Hugh Wilson and takes place in a time when there has been a shortage of police officers that forces the academy to allow all willing candidates entry. This eliminates all physical fitness or education requirements. Because of these lowered standards for recruits, the academy becomes filled with misfits and unqualified soon-to-be officers. The movie follows these people through their time in the academy. While there, the Chief of Police Henry Hurst (George R. Robertson) and Lieutenant Harris (G.W. Bailey) try to make recruits so miserable that they will drop out. Chief Hurst and Lieutenant Harris want to do this because they are mad that the standards which they had to adhere to when going through the academy are no longer a requirement for the new recruits. Due to the shortage in officers, Chief Hurst and Lieutenant Harris can not kick any recruits out of the academy and the cadets must quit on their own. At the time this movie was released there was a real shortage of state police in New York. In an abstract on the National Criminal Justice Reference Service I read that New York State Police had a “smaller staff in 1980 than it did in 1974. The number of

troopers on road patrol has declined 3.8 percent in the last 5 years. In contrast, the number of cases reported to NYSP has increased by 11.3 percent, while the number of criminal and noncriminal investigations have increased by 40.3 percent” (Stephens, Cocci, Roberts, & Olson, 1980). This shortage of police officers seen in 1980 by those in New York could have lead them to view *Police Academy* as a plausible scenario. If New York had become desperate enough to cut all requirements for police officers and allowed anyone to join, those in the state could have seen their local police as incompetent because they might have felt that having no standards for recruitment would only result in way, as what was depicted in *Police Academy*.

Once of the new cadets and main character of *Police Academy*, Mahoney (Steve Guttenberg), spends his whole time in the academy trying to get kicked out. Mahoney has been placed there instead of being sent to prison, though upon his arrival he does not know that Lieutenant Harris has made a deal with his parole officer to keep him there the whole duration of the academy. Throughout the movie Mahoney is constantly playing pranks and doing all he can to get sent home. In one scene he takes a new megaphone to Lieutenant Harris, after Harris yells into it the audience sees that Mahoney put black paint on the end of it which is now surrounding Harris’ mouth. It is harmless pranks like this that Mahoney continues to do throughout the movie to get on the nerves of Lieutenant Harris and other officers in charge. In addition to pulling pranks on those with authority, Mahoney is also seen taking a test with crayons, showing that he has no intentions of taking the police academy seriously.

One day in the academy Mahoney gets in a fight with other cadets in the cafeteria and he is finally told to pack his bags and go home. This is the point at which he realizes that he actually enjoys being in the police academy and he wants to stay. As all his fellow police academy cadets are sent to help control a riot downtown, they get mixed up in the center of the riot instead of the

outer boundaries of the downtown district due to a miscommunication. At this time Mahoney takes it upon himself to go help his fellow recruits. He is able to save Lieutenant Harris' life with the help of Hightower. Earlier in the academy, Hightower was kicked out for fighting after an officer in charge made a racial slur against Hightower's fellow African American cadet. Regardless of his expulsion from the academy, Hightower came to the riot to help the other recruits in his street clothes. This confused the rioter that had Lieutenant Harris held hostage and allowed Mahoney and Hightower to rescue him.

The way that recruits are being treated because they are not qualified gives a depiction of how the academy is in some departments. Even though I have not experienced what the police academy is like first hand, from what I have learned through hiring seminars with the Los Angeles Police Department it certainly is not easy being in the academy. When the other aspects of this movie are set aside, it is able to show audience members the intense training that police officers endure in order to graduate from the academy. While this is not a completely accurate presentation of life in the academy, it does give viewers a chance to see what police officers go through. This movie could aid public views of officers to become more positive by getting a look into the academy and all the rigorous training that recruits endure.

Keeping in the 1980s theme of comedic police officers, the 1984 comedy *Beverly Hills Cop* was directed by Martin Brest. It followed Axel Foley (Eddie Murphy) a Detroit police officer going to Beverly Hills to investigate the murder of one of his best friends, Mikey. The Beverly Hills police force does not take him seriously because he is always causing scenes and obtaining information in less than rulebook ways, often making jokes and getting into situations that make the audience perceive police officers as goofy, not to be taken seriously, and unprofessional.

In one scene Foley is seen walking into Victor Maitland's building posing as a flower delivery man so he can ask Maitland some questions. Maitland is a presumed bad guy and Foley believes he is involved in or has information about the murder. When Foley tried to question Maitland about the murder of Mikey he has security escort Foley out of the building. Not only do they walk him out, they walk him to the front door and throw him onto the street through the glass. After being thrown out the window Foley is arrested by two police officers. As he is being handcuffed and put into the back of the squad car he asks the officers why he is being arrested and they say, "Possession of a concealed weapon and disturbing the peace." To which Foley replies with "Disturbing the peace?! I got thrown out of a window! Whats the charge for getting pushed out of a moving car? J-walking?!" While in the police car driving to the station he says, "This is the cleanest and nicest police car I've ever been in my entire life. This things nicer than my apartment." As he rambles on in the back seat viewers see the two officers up front looking annoyed as he continues to talk about random meaningless topics. This is just one example of Alex Foley's sense of humor seen throughout the movie.

Even though officer Foley seems to be messing around, he always gets the job done. While he slowly gains more information about the murder of Mikey, the Beverly Hills police officers still try to keep a close watch on him. While searching for Mikey's killer, Foley sneaks into a warehouse where supposedly Victor Maitland uses coffee grounds to pack drugs. While Foley is entering this warehouse for no legal reason, he believes that there is illegal activity going on in there and that it could be connected to the murder. This demonstrates to the audience that while police officers try to do things the legal way, they are still humans who have emotions. Clearly Foley is caught up in this murder investigation because it was his best friend; in the real world it would not be likely for him to be allowed on this case. In a way this aspect of the movie

is realistic for viewers because they see how easily it is for police officers to get caught up in a case because of emotions. However, this also shows a type of “superhero” police officer still being depicted in media because Foley is trying to continue working even though he is too invested. The depictions of law enforcement presented in this movie are more human, but almost humanizing in a bad way because of the “superhero” attitude still being seen beneath the humanizing aspects. While this is a small step toward humanizing presentations of law enforcement, it still falls short in comparison to the realistic movies seen in the 2000s.

Foley tries to get the two Beverly Hills Detectives that are assigned to following him to come look at the drugs. Unfortunately, Maitland and his boys arrive before the Detectives and leave Foley to be killed. Luckily the detectives arrive before Foley is killed and take him to Maitland’s house where a gun battle begins. Foley kills Zack during this fight because he has discovered that Zack is the one who murdered Mikey. Foley and one of the Detectives shoot and kill Maitland in the end. While this movie does use much humor and shows police officers not always doing their job by the rulebook, it is a small step towards a realistic depiction of law enforcement, and greater than seen in *Dirty Harry* where everything was over exaggerated and “superhero” in nature.

Also taking a step away from the “superhero” depiction of police officers was the 1987 film *Dragnet*, directed by Tom Mankiewicz. *Dragnet* was released to the general public as a movie based on the television series starring Jack Webb. While the series and movie both used different actors they had the same story line and followed Sargent Joe Friday. In the beginning of the *Dragnet* movie the voice over says that the events seen in the film are based on a true story. This movie follows newly paired partners Sergeant Joe Friday (Dan Aykroyd) and Detective Pep Streebek (Tom Hanks) who are a very unlikely pair. At first they do not get along and it takes

some time before they are able to bond as partners. They go on their investigations and even though their personalities clash, they are able to solve crimes as a team. The two partners become close as they investigate a PAGAN (People Against Goodness And Normalcy) cult. This movie is able to demonstrate to audiences how partners do not always get along or have a strong bond with each other, but they are able to grow closer through the work that they do together.

Throughout the movie Detective Streebek is seen taking the job less seriously than Sergeant Friday; who is very serious about his job and doing it to the best of his abilities. In the first scene that features the partners meeting it is clear from the beginning that these two are extreme opposites. Streebek arrives in a beat up car that is being towed by a truck and loses the drivers door as it comes to a stop. When Streebek gets out of his car he is wearing a bandana around his head and has long messy hair hanging out of it. He is wearing a long coat with baggy pants and high top sneakers. As he approaches Sergeant Friday he shows the inside of his coat has a badge on it and he informs Friday that he is his new partner, to which Friday says, "Not looking like that you aren't mister." Friday then quotes the Detective dress code telling Streebek that he needs to shave, wash up, and change his clothes. As Sergeant Friday narrates the movie he says that Streebek pictured himself as a "hipster free bird cop" but is about to have his wings cut. This first interaction between the two partners shows how extremely different they are. Yet throughout the movie viewers are able to see how working together the two are able to overcome their differences and work together as a team to figure out that the new Reverend to Los Angeles, named Jonathan Whirley (Christopher Plummer), is the leader of the PAGAN cult movement.

During the partner's investigation they have to go undercover so that they can get into a PAGAN party. With wigs, glasses, and facial hair, their disguises are quite over the top. While driving to the party they are pulled over by Highway Patrol and asked to show license and

registration. After showing their fake identification the police officers reveal that they are actually part of the PAGAN cult and just posing as law enforcement to patrol the area and make sure no non-PAGANS get into the party site. While pulling up to the party Sergeant Friday says, “Must be every other stolen police vehicle on our hot sheet. We’re definitely on to something here” and Streebek replies with, “You think so?” in a very sarcastic tone of voice. Friday appears unaware, or unaffected, by Streebek’s sarcasm and simply nods his head and says, “mmhmm.” This is just one example of Streebek’s sense of humor and sarcasm used throughout the movie. The sarcasm so frequently used by Streebek gives viewers the perception that police officers are always sarcastic, humorous, or witty while on the job.

Many people do not understand what police officers do on a daily basis, and this is why most partners end up being close in the real world. Beyond spending so much time together, police officers who work as partners see things together that almost nobody else in their daily life will ever see. Unlike *Dirty Harry*, this movie features partners instead of an individual working on his own. While Inspector Callahan has partners, he never interacted with them like the two in *Dragnet*. In *Dirty Harry* the main police officer was the “superhero” and partners were seen more as sidekicks than as equals. Regardless of personality or other aspects, when two police officers are put together they are able to work as a team because there is something about the job that brings them closer to each other than anything else could. When working together as a pair it is possible that these officers do a better job than if they were working on their own, or either of them were trying to be a “superhero.”

*The Transition to the Realistic Police Officer*

A turn from comedy to drama was taken in the 1990s. While these movies lack the comedy as seen in the 1980s, these movies possess more realistic depictions of law enforcement officers than decades prior. The lack of a comedic aspect is possibly what makes these movies more realistic in nature. Though some of the dramatic aspects of law enforcement are a little overdone in these movies, they still form a better construction of police officers than the movies that came before them.

In 1996 the movie *Fargo*, directed by Coen brothers Joel and Ethan, was released. The beginning of this movie starts by telling the audience that it is based on a true story. While this is debatable, the writers claim that the murders did take place, though not in Minnesota where the movie is set. With the audience believing that the movie is based on a true story, they are going to be inclined to a more positive view of law enforcement officers if it is true that they solved a murder.

This movie follows Jerry (William H. Macy), a crooked used car salesman, as he gets in over his head with two bad guys. Jerry has hired these two men to kidnap his wife so that he can collect a ransom from her wealthy father. This deal is turned into a series of local homicides when the two men kill a state trooper and two bystanders the night of the kidnapping. These homicides cause Chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) to get involved in solving this case. She is not only a female Chief in her city, she is also seven months pregnant and still on the job investigating these murders. Not only does this movie feature a strong female officer who often outsmarts the criminals and her own male counterparts, it also gives insight into her personal life at home.

In an article about benefits of law enforcement agencies having more female police officers, authors present statistics about the number of women seen as police officers in past years;

Although women gained an average of approximately half a percentage point per year within large police agencies from 1972 to 1999, there is mounting evidence that this trend has now stalled or even reversed. In 2000 and 2001, the representation of women in large police agencies actually declined from the year before -- from 14.3% in 1999 and 13.0% in 2000 to 12.7% in 2001 (Lonsway et al.).

With laws preventing discrimination and making departments give women special accommodations for pregnancy, law enforcement is no longer a male-only job. The stronger female presence as police officers in movies could contribute to the increase in female officers seen prior to 2000. The article by Lonsway, Moore, Harrington, Smeal, & Spilar also gives readers six advantages for law enforcement agencies that hire and retain more women. These positives of having more female police officers range from “female officers are proven to be as competent as their male counterparts” to “female officers are less likely to use excessive force.” When viewers see Chief Gunderson in *Fargo* they could realize that they can also be a police officer while still having a family and life at home.

In multiple scenes viewers get to see Chief Marge Gunderson as she sits at home having dinner with her husband. This insight into Gunderson’s home life is something that allows audience members to see her as a real person who has a home and life that she goes back to after work. Seeing police officers in their everyday life is something that was not seen in *Dirty Harry*, *Police Academy*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, or *Dragnet*. This is one way that movies in the 1990s started

taking a step towards more realistic depictions of law enforcement officers, by giving viewers a look into what the officers lives are like when they leave the job and go home.

Another scene that shows Chief Gunderson in a more accurate way is when she goes in to question Jerry the crooked used car salesman. Once Jerry realizes that she is figuring out his involvement in the case, he tells her he is going to go do a car count to satisfy one of her questions. As he goes to do so he instead takes off in one of the vehicles and flees the scene. Being that Chief Gunderson is a pregnant woman, there is no logical way that she could chase him. This is clearly a turn away from the “superhero” cop who would have taken off running after the vehicle and probably caught up with Jerry in no time at all. The depiction of Chief Gunderson seen in this interaction with Jerry allows viewers to see that not all police officers are “superheroes” and they can not catch every bad guy that they are after. Even though she knows Jerry is getting away, there is nothing the Chief can do. Unlike the independent “superhero” police officer seen in *Dirty Harry*, Gunderson tries to call for backup, but Jerry is out of sight before she can connect with anyone from the department and get assistance.

Also unlike the “superhero” genre is the 1995 film *Bad Boys* which is set in Miami Florida and was directed by Michael Bay. The story follows two best friends as they are narcotic detectives solving a case of \$100 million of seized heroin that has been stolen from the police department’s vault. In contrast to the 1987 film *Dagnet*, this movie demonstrates how two partners interact with each other when they are best friends before they are partners.

The transition towards more realistic police officer films is still seen in this movie just as in *Fargo*. When lead characters Marcus Burnett (Martin Lawrence) and Mike Lowrey (Will Smith) are driving in their unmarked car on patrol their conversations show the true friendship that they have. This is also a good representation of how police officers interact with one another

when they are on patrol. The friendship seen in this movie is similar to that seen in the 2012 movie *End of Watch* which I will discuss in the next section. Burnett and Lowrey often give each other a hard time and use foul language when speaking with one another. I would say that you would not talk with someone who is not your best friend the way that these two talk to each other.

In the beginning scene the two partners are driving in Lowrey's car when Burnett begins eating his lunch. Lowrey looks over at him and says, "What is this having a picnic in my car?" Burnett asks where the cup holders are and Lowrey says he does not have any. To which Burnett replies, "Eighty thousand dollars for this car and you ain't got no cup holders?" Lowrey corrects him saying, "It's a hundred and five thousand dollars and just happens to be one of the fastest production cars on the planet. Zero to sixty in four seconds sweetie. This is a limited edition." Burnett has a sarcastic comeback saying, "You damn right it's limited. No cup holder, no backseat." Lowrey pulls the car over when Burnett spills his fries everywhere. While pulled over, two men try to car jack the partners. While being held at gunpoint they pretend to argue with each other to distract the robbers so they can over take and arrest the men who tried to seal Lowrey's car. This almost appears to be a return to the "superhero" type of police officer seen in *Dirty Harry*, making this movie still no more than a transition to a realistic depiction of law enforcement because it is not yet accurate.

The dialogue between the two is not only humorous, but also realistic in feeling. Unlike the 1980s exaggerated comedic police officer, to an audience it seems that the way the partners are talking to each other is how partners would really interact while on the job. They have a sense of humor and give each other a hard time, but as seen in the movie they always have each other's backs in situations when they need to work together to keep each other safe. Even though

there is humor in this movie and it shows how the partners interact with one another, it is not used to the point that was seen in the 1980 comedic police officer genre.

Just as was seen in *Fargo*, the film *Bad Boys* also adds a realistic feel to it by giving glimpses into the men's personal lives. In one scene, Burnett is seen waking up cuddled in bed with his wife. Once they wake up and Burnett's wife gets out of bed, viewers are able to hear children coming and Burnett is joined in bed by his three little ones. The next scene shows Burnett eating breakfast while the kids run through the house. Lowrey then comes over to join the family for breakfast and the children all start screaming "Uncle Mike" when he comes through the door. Seeing Burnett's family and knowing that his partner is like an uncle to his kids shows the close relationship they have as partners both on and off the job. While the movie as a whole did not taken an entire shift to a realistic film, these glances into the partner's personal lives start to give viewers a slightly realistic depiction of police officers as real people behind the badge.

While the 1990s made a shift towards more realistic depictions of law enforcement officers, there was still a certain amount of accuracy lacking. The 2000s presented viewers with far more realistic depictions of police officers in media by taking more time to study what police officers really do while they are on watch. Movies like *Dirty Harry*, *Police Academy*, or *Fargo*, didn't receive the attention that they did because of their accuracy, they were simply entertaining for viewers. While more recent films, such as *End of Watch*, received much attention because of the accurate portrayals of law enforcement presented to audiences in the movie due to the research done in pre-production by writers, producers, and actors. This new aspect of thoroughly researching the details of events that police officers encounter while on the job is the largest step taken in the turn toward more accurate depictions of law enforcement.

### *The Realistic Police Officer*

In the 2000s audiences have seen many more movies released that are focused on police officers and portraying them in more realistic and accurate ways. These accurate depictions of law enforcement can help increase positive public opinions of police officers on a whole. Just as *Fargo* and *Bad Boys* started the transition to a realistic depiction of law enforcement, the movies in the 2000s continue this shift and adopt an even more realistic portrayals of police officers.

The 2001 movie, *Training Day*, follows Detective Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington) in the narcotics division of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as he evaluates another narcotic detective, Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke), for a twenty-four hour period. This movie was directed by Antoine Fuqua and written by the same man who would later direct and write *End of Watch*, David Ayer. While the main character Harris turns out to be a bad cop, the good cop still prevails. After seeing Harris handle his job in a very self-centered way, Hoyt is abandoned by Harris at the home of a gangster to be killed. This constructs police officers in two ways for audience members; the good police officer, and the bad police officer.

In one scene, Harris and Hoyt are seen busting some teenagers and taking their marijuana and cigarettes from them. While driving away Harris talks about the drugs that they confiscated and tells Hoyt, "A narcotics agent must know and love narcotics. In fact, a good narcotics agent should have narcotics in his blood." When Hoyt sees that Harris is lighting the pipe and says, "What? Are you gonna smoke that?" and Harris says, "No, you are." After some back and forth of Hoyt trying to refuse the pipe, Harris holds a gun to his head and forces him to take a hit. Harris says if you deny drugs on the street you will be shot in a heartbeat. After telling Hoyt he did not want him in his division because he would not smoke the drugs, Harris has successfully

convinced Hoyt to do it. After he has smoked and is feeling out of it, Harris tells Hoyt that the marijuana was laced with PCP, also stating that he had never done PCP but now Hoyt had. Harris later uses the fact that Hoyt has drugs in his blood to prevent him from being able to snitch on him for his suspicious behavior.

On the one side of the movie, audience members can see Harris and think that police officers are all self-centered and try to use their job to gain free drugs and money. They can also see officers as traitors who will betray those in their department so they can continue with their schemes without being caught. However, in the end Harris was killed by Russian hit-men because the gang members all got tired of him being so arrogant and using his badge to take from them in illegal ways without being caught. This demonstrates to audience members that when police officers take advantage of their badge they will probably get caught one way or another. They will either be found out by the department and fired or arrested, or they could be killed by those in the community that get sick of dealing with them. Whether a police officer be good or bad, this movie demonstrates that the good will still prevail in the end.

However; on the other side of things, audiences can choose to view Hoyt as the majority of police officers knowing that not all of them are like Harris. Luckily for Hoyt, someone who he had saved from a sexual assault earlier on is the cousin of the gangster that Harris hired to kill Hoyt. This shows audience members that because Hoyt was a good police officer and he did his job right, his life was saved. Had Hoyt been like Harris and only cared about himself he would have been killed by the gangster. The saving of Hoyt's life because of his prior good deeds gives viewers the chance to see that those who do good to the people they set out to protect are able to greater their protection on the streets.

This movie demonstrates that while there may be dirty officers in the department, there are also good ones. Even though there is also a potentially negative portrayal in this movie as well, knowing there are good police officers out there can help boost public opinion of them on a larger scale. One could consider this movie as an accurate portrayal of the LAPD at the time because there were many different scandals going on in the department in the years prior to 2001. “The Rampart Scandal” is a well known corruption scandal that happened in the LAPD beginning in 1997.

In the late 1990s, the corruption of the LAPD Rampart Division’s Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) anti-gang unit came to light.

Disgraced officers were convicted of offenses such as planting false evidence, stealing, dealing illegal drugs, bank robbery, and perjury. Cops were proven to have committed unjustified beatings and shootings (Noe).

With the movie *Training Day* being released on the heels of this scandal it is understandable how there would be a dirty police officer portrayed in it. It is also feasible this movie could be seen as realistic, though taken in a negative way because of the real events that had transpired so closely to this movie’s release. Fortunately for the LAPD, there was a much more positive movie released in 2012 that gave an even more realistic depiction of the department and put them in a much more positive light than did *Training Day*.

In 2012 there was an even more realistic depiction of police officers released in the movie *End of Watch*, which was directed by David Ayer. This movie follows two partners in the Los Angeles Police Department through their daily lives on the job, as well as their personal lives while not on watch. There are numerous ways that this movie gave an accurate, and positive, depiction of law enforcement officers. The main way this movie was able to be so

realistic is due to pre-production research and study of the LAPD by those involved with the film. Because of another incident in the LAPD prior to the movie's release, *End of Watch* was able to serve as a reminder to the community that not all police officers are bad.

In Los Angeles at the time of the movie's release there was negative press regarding police officers and how they handle their job. On September 21, 2012, the city of Los Angeles was ordered to pay \$5.7 million to a man named Robert Contreras who was shot by LAPD officers (Rubin). The man was a known gang member who was fleeing the scene of a drive-by shooting. When the police arrived at the scene they chased the van that was involved in the shooting. The three suspects got out of the van and fled in different directions. One of them, Contreras, ran down a dark driveway with police chasing him on foot, and then turned toward them with an object in his hand. The object in question turned out to be a cell phone, but knowing the man's criminal past, and given the situation, the police were forced to defend themselves rather than risk their own lives hoping that the dark object in the convicted felon's hand was not a weapon. During the trial, the judge did not allow any of the information about the man's past be told to the jury. This means that the jury was left unaware of his gang related past and his 2009 role in a drive-by shooting for which he served 7 years in prison. The jury voted unanimously in favor of Contreras. This trial took place the same day that *End of Watch* was released into theaters. While some of the LAPD officers were being charged with a wrongful shooting, there was a movie being released that would praise them for the great job they do protecting the city of Los Angeles.

In the movie *End of Watch*, viewers follow the two lead officers, Brian Taylor (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Mike Zavala (Michael Pena), throughout their patrol. I was recently in Los Angeles at a seminar for the LAPD recruits and I learned that all of the calls which Taylor and

Zavala respond to in the movie were real calls that the department received at one time or another. Not all of these calls were experienced by one team, but they did all occur. I found it interesting talking to the police officers in Los Angeles and hearing them say how much work the people involved with *End of Watch* put into researching the department. Instead of building a new movie off of what had been done in the past, or their own perceptions of what the LAPD is like, those involved with making *End of Watch* realistic did extensive research into what it is like to be a police officer in Los Angeles.

Actors went on real ride-alongs with LAPD and experienced first hand what it is like to be a police officer in such a large department. I was able to interview Cal Poly San Luis Obispo student, Kyle Palazzolo, whose father is a captain in the Los Angeles Police Department.

Palazzolo said that because the director of *End of Watch* (David Ayer) did work alongside the Los Angeles Police Department it was able to help make the movie as accurate as possible. He also told me that his father has said, “*End of Watch* is the most accurate depiction of what life is like as a police officer and how police officers interact with one another.” This could mostly be contributed to the research that done prior to filming *End of Watch*.

These steps that were taken before filming contributed greatly to the realistic feeling of being on patrol in Los Angeles. Not only do all the calls that Taylor and Zavala go on seem realistic, but their lives seem real as well. Throughout this movie audience members watch Taylor fall in love with Janet (Anna Kendrick), get married, and share the news that they are expecting a baby. Viewers also see Zavala’s genuine love for his wife displayed through stories he tells Taylor of when he and his wife fell in love in high school, as well as when he and his wife have their first baby and are seen holding him in the hospital.

While driving through Los Angeles while on patrol with each other one night, Taylor is seen giving Zavala a hard time about his large Latino family and all the Quinceaneras they have. Pena does not deny that this is true, and he adds on by saying at least there is always something going on. He also jokes about how white people always talk about the new flavored coffee and how excellent the baristas are. The way they joke with each other about their backgrounds and personal lives shows that they have a close relationship in which neither of them will get offended by what the other says. In addition, they clearly have seen each other act in a certain way and talk about certain things while on patrol with each other so that they are able to have this type of banter with one another.

By seeing the partners in their everyday life as well as on the job, viewers get a sense for what these police officers are really like. This can lead to more positive perceptions of them when society can see that they are human, just like the rest of us. In 2012, the poll conducted by *The Gallup Report* found that 58% of those surveyed had rated law enforcement officers with “high” or “very high” when it came to police honesty and ethics. This could be partly because when people in society are able to see more realistic depictions of police officers they are more likely to have these positive views. Unlike the depictions of law enforcement seen in prior decades, this accurate portrayal could have aided in the more positive perceptions of police officers.

### Conclusion

As these movies have become more realistic, the public’s opinions of police officers have become more positive as well. While there could be other reasons for this increase in positive public opinions of law enforcement officers, it is also known that media does influence viewer’s

perceptions of those being portrayed. As media constructions of police officers have become more positive and realistic, the public started to view them as human beings. When viewers are able to see what police officers do on a daily basis it could be that they gain respect for them and see them in a more positive light. Knowing that there is not always a clear right or wrong answer, people may rate the police officer's honesty and ethics higher because they have a better grasp of what they go through.

The shift to more realistic depictions of police officers has come in small steps from the 1970s to now. From the "superhero" police officer seen in *Dirty Harry*, to the humanized police officer seen in *End of Watch*, the media has taken a turn toward a much more accurate presentation of law enforcement. The depictions of police officers seen in the 1980s began to make police officers seem more like humans and less like "superheroes." This was done by having less of a single police officer who acts on his own as a hero, and a stronger presence of a team of officers working together, as seen in *Police Academy*. The team like feeling encourages more positive perceptions of law enforcement as it humanizes them by showing their need for others while on the job.

From the teamwork displayed in *Police Academy*, to the nearly accurate depictions seen in *Fargo* and *Bad Boys*, there has been a consistent shift in media depictions of law enforcement over time. While these representations of police officers were not yet completely realistic, they were the biggest step in the transition to more accurate presentations of police officers in movies. Even though the characters in *Fargo* and *Bad Boys* were humanized in some ways, there are still times in these movies, most specifically *Bad Boys*, that feel like a return to the "superhero" police officer that was seen in *Dirty Harry*. When the main characters are able to overtake car jackers, it appears that the "superhero" genre is still present in the form of "superheroes." No

longer an individual that works on his own, but a duo that work together to rise above all odds and solve crimes.

It was not until the 2000s that audiences were able to see accurate and humanizing depictions of law enforcement officers. Unlike *Dirty Harry*, the movie *End of Watch* shows two partners working side by side and not as “superheroes” working on their own. In addition to less of a “superhero” feeling in *End of Watch*, there is also more humanizing aspects than seen in *Police Academy*, or even in the 1990s transitional movies. With the officer’s home lives being a large part of the movie, viewers are able to see what police officers are like off the job with their loved ones, as well as how they interact with each other while not on watch as a team.

Even though 58% giving a “high” or “very high” rating is not that much, it is still more than the 10% that gave a “low” or “very low” rating. It is also higher than the 37% of those polled that gave a “high” or “very high” rating in 1977. Even though this specific topic has not had much research done on it, this could be the start of diving into a topic that should be researched and studied more. These polls could be showing an increase in positive public opinion of police officers because of the increasingly realistic constructions of police officers in the media. If it is true that more realistic depictions of law enforcement officers create more positive views then this is something that should be studied further in order to gain more insight and knowledge. It could be beneficial to law enforcement stereotypes for that information to be given to producers and those involved in making movies. This could lead to more positive perceptions of police officers by the general public, which could lead to more overall support of our local law enforcement officers. The increase in higher positive views of police officers suggests that the more realistic and humanizing depictions of law enforcement promote these positive perceptions.

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