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College Students' Attitudes Towards Police Officers and their Perceptions of Prison Systems

By

Lee Alexander Poff

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the  
University Honors Scholars Program  
Honors College  
and the  
Honors-in-Discipline Criminal Justice & Criminology Program  
College of Arts and Sciences  
East Tennessee State University

Thesis Mentor: Dr. Bradley Edwards  
Thesis Reader: Josie Klepper

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Police in America have a long history of being a mechanism for creating social tension. In the past and present, different social movements have spawned from clashes with law enforcement or police misconduct. Much of this social tension and numerous social movements largely came about from police becoming a commonplace everyday actor in American society. The professionalization of police began this process of implementing officers into the everyday lives of American citizens. This professionalization of the police began after President Herbert Hoover launched the Wickersham Commission in 1929 that was designed to investigate the general ineffectiveness of police departments nationwide (Wright 2013).

Following the Wickersham Commission, the push to professionalize American police forces took hold. Professionalization brought about our modern view of policing, however, elements of professionalism such as certain crime control tactics and the insertion into social tension that have had substantial drawbacks. These drawbacks led to a significant negative impact on police perceptions among certain demographics. Police forces in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement were used to enforce segregation and racist social policies. Still vividly clear are images of police arresting and beating protestors and while simultaneously protecting Klansmen marches. Along with this, the assassination of key social leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X did irreparable damage to the perceptions of police in America, primarily among African Americans (Potter, 2013).

Towards the end of the Civil Rights Movement police continued to be a source of public social tension. The late 1960s and 70s brought the Vietnam War, which saw mass protests due to its unpopularity. This social tension again pitted the police forces against the American populace.

Police were often called upon to disperse protests and often had the appearance of minions of an authoritarian, war-mongering government.

During the Vietnam era the U.S. government began the still ongoing “War on Drugs”. President Ronald Reagan, in 1982, reintroduced the nation to its mission of fighting drugs and taking offenders off the streets. The War on Drugs has led to a number of controversial policing techniques, most notably, the implementation of “Stop and Frisk” practices that have been tainted with accusations of racial bias. In 2006, 89% of all stops initiated under stop and frisk in New York City involved a non-white person being stopped (Ridgeway, 2007). Along with the controversial policing strategies, the War on Drugs is considered a prime factor in sky rocketing America’s prison population. In 2017, a little more than 2.2 million people were incarcerated in American prisons and jails. This number reflected a 350% increase of the prison population across the past four decades (Williams, 2016). However, the last few years have seen a slight shrinking of the overall incarcerated populace. The implementation of mandatory minimum sentencing during the War on Drugs corresponds with the substantial increase in the incarcerated population.

In recent years the U.S. population and media has casted further scrutiny on the police and our government’s policies surrounding mass incarceration. With the recent scrutiny in the past decade, the public’s perception of police has reached historic lows. Gallup’s 25 year trend of police perceptions shows the average consensus of “confidence in law enforcement” to stand around 57% approval of the statement. However in the height of the Black Lives Matters movement during 2014-15, confidence in police dropped to a record tying low of 52% in June of 2015(Norman, 2018). Recent results, however, show a return of confidence to the average of 57%. Although the recent return to the average in Gallup’s polling there is evidence that some

demographics are not regaining confidence in police. Young people under the age of 35, Hispanics, and those with Liberal political beliefs have remained trending negatively in their overall confidence in police (Norman, 2018). With the current politicization of police and heightened tension in politics, these gaps in demographic views on police will likely continue to polarize.

The current research seeks to study and gauge current perceptions of police among college students at East Tennessee State University. As well as studying perceptions of police among students, the research will compare police perceptions among students with student opinions on incarceration. Correlations will be attempted to be observed through various demographical characteristics and similar standardized viewpoints. This will build on prior research from Lim (2015) and others in which college students were used to gauge results around perceptions of police. It is important to understand college student perceptions on police and incarceration as they form the future work force and form a large voting bloc to impact policy in the future. Following this introduction, this thesis will cover an additional four sections. The ensuing section covers the research's literature review, followed by the research methods section. Section four will cover the study results and section five will close with the discussion. Furthermore, the research of this thesis seeks to answer the following eleven research questions.

R1: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police between males and females?

R2: Is there a significant relationship between attitudes toward police and age?

R3: Is there a significant difference in attitude toward police between whites and racial minorities?

R4: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police between students who have an academic major of criminal justice and students who have an academic major in another field?

R5: Is there a significant difference between attitudes toward police based on the respondent's academic class?

R6: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between males and females?

R7: Is there a significant relationship between perceptions of incarceration and age?

R8: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between whites and racial minorities?

R9: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between students who have an academic major of criminal justice and students who have an academic major in another field?

R10: Is there a significant difference between perceptions of incarceration based on the respondent's academic class?

R11: Is respondent's perception of incarceration influenced by their fear of crime.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Attitudes toward police and perceptions regarding incarceration have both been topics of previous research. The vast majority of early research focused on the impact of demographic factors, such as gender, age and race, on attitudes towards police. More recent research studies have considered the impact of more experiential and relational factors on attitudes and perceptions of police and police activities, including both the amount and type of contact with police. Additionally, with the rise of political and media attention on the overpopulation of America's prison systems and the need for prison reform, recent studies have investigated public perceptions and attitudes towards both the incarceration process as well as the correctional facilities. The primary demographic factor studied in past and current research is race; however, there are theories that both socioeconomic factors and gender have an impact on attitudes towards police and incarceration. The research on prison systems and jail perceptions has focused primarily on prison staff members and the prisoners. Less of an emphasis has been placed on studying the perceptions of those outside of the prison systems.

The areas of literature relevant to the current research that compared attitudes towards police and perceptions of prison systems are analyzed in this review to show the progression of the investigative focus over the past four decades. This literature review is divided into two distinct sections. The first section discusses literature and research focused on perceptions of police and policing activities. Variables theorized to impact perception on police and policing are reviewed; these variables include age, race, gender, and socio-economic status. The second section of this review discusses research surrounding societal perceptions of incarceration and the prison system. In comparison to perceptions of police, there is substantially less published research on public perceptions of incarceration and correctional facilities. However, the same

demographic variables used in the research concerning police and policing in the first section are reviewed in the second section of this literature review as well. The final area of research that contributes to this study and will be included in this review, concerns the impact of politics and media on attitudes towards police and incarceration in the United States.

### **Attitudes towards Police**

There are two foundational, published studies from more than a decade ago that propagated more recent studies on public perceptions towards police, policing activities and policies. S. H. Decker (1981) examined factors that potentially impacted citizens' attitudes towards the police, including race, age, socioeconomic status, and gender. Additionally, Decker provided a thorough review of the literature published to-date on both individual and contextual factors impacting attitudes towards police and policing (Decker, 1981). Later, Brown (2002) updated Decker's work and provided a review of over 100 articles on perceptions and attitudes towards the police. Brown's, and, hence, Decker's, reviews found that, based on the published literature, there were only four main variables that had significant impacts on attitudes towards the police. These four variables are age, neighborhood type, contact with police and race. The review of the published literature up through 2002 showed interactive effects between these four variables and other less understood variables, such as victimization experiences. As a result, Brown warned the reader against generalization of these findings across changing study conditions (Brown, 2002).

A second key contribution to the research on public attitudes towards police is the work by Baker, Nienstedt, Everett and McCleary (1983). They investigated relationships between crime rate perceptions, confidence levels in the police, and fear. Through modeling and



relational analyses of factors related to these three outcomes, they showed that victimization and local crime rates had significant effects on individual perceptions of crime; however, they did not have a direct effect on confidence in police. Age and race variables had significant, direct impact on confidence levels in police (Baker et al, 1983). These foundational findings spawned continued research and investigations in order to study these four factors in various contexts as well as to understand their relationships with other less studied factors.

### **Primary Factor One: Age**

Over the decades of different research focusing on investigating the attitudes and public perceptions of the police and policing activities, age was consistently found to have a significant impact. Murty, Roebuck, and Smith found that, as individuals aged, their opinion of police grew increasingly more positive. Hyeyoung Lim (2015) studied different learning model's effects on police perceptions. Lim's study surveyed college students at two separate universities located in the southern and mid-western regions of the United States. Lim's (2015) survey results showed two variables had a distinct effect on the student's perceptions of the police prior to learning model component. Student age showed a lower coefficient of trust; this result aligned with Murty, Roebuck, and Smith's (1990) idea that younger individuals hold lower trust of police.

Age and race intersect in a 2017 study by Sethuraju, Sole, Oliver, and Prew. The study surveyed in total 537 college students at three different Midwestern universities. The study found age to be insignificant in the surveying of college students. As well, the study found that blacks and Native Americans had lower perceptions of police than their white and Asian counterparts. Blacks and Native Americans also had a much higher general belief in the amount of police misconduct.

## **Primary Factor Two: Race**

Race has been the most consistent factor impacting citizens' perceptions of police. A consistent finding among the published research in this area is that race is a significant factor affecting attitudes towards police as well as perceptions of overall fairness in policing. Minorities seem to consistently have less favorable attitudes towards police than do Whites. However, many of the studies including race as a factor, focused primarily on African Americans and did not include many other non-white races. Regardless, the majority of literature on attitudes and perceptions towards police by citizens in the United States show that African-Americans have a higher prevalence of lack of trust towards police and consistently perceive racial bias in the police in comparison to other races (Baker et al, 1983; Correia, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996; Decker, 1981; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997, 2005). Johnson et al. stated that there is a "profound racial divide in perceptions of the police in the United States, with African Americans and other people of color reporting more negative views of the police than do whites....(2017, pg.1186)"

The concern about race and policing has led to a large amount of research investigating the difference in police interventions across races, disparities in experiences with the police, and perceptions of bias in policing activities between the different races. Some studies have indicated that race interacts with other important variables, including age, frequency of direct police contacts, and media attention. Several studies showed that the public views of the police are extremely negative amongst younger minority citizens (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Weitzer, 2009, and Gau & Brunson, 2010). Based on a study of 784 citizens in two Washington cities, Thurman and Reisig (1996) found no difference in attitudes towards police between racial groups. This lack of racial differences in opinion was attributed to the socio-economic status

being very similar between whites and minorities along with the low sample size of African Americans surveyed. A study by Johnson and Kuhns (2009) showed that indirect, contextual interactions about biased police actions had a much larger impact on the attitudes of African American citizens in contrast to the impact of these interactions on white participants. Hence, with the increasing diversity in American communities, the impact of race may be confounded with factors that have been studied less frequently.

Weitzer and Tuch (2004) studied why opinions of police are lower among African Americans and Latinos in comparison to Whites. Using a sample size of 1,792 residents of U.S. metropolitan cities, this research used variables such as race, media exposure, and contact with police to measure attitudes towards police. They tested several hypotheses, including that the racial differences persist due to influences of personal contact experiences with police and media reports of police bias and misconduct. They also compared the perceptions of African American citizens to those of the Hispanic respondents. In all of the models constructed, blacks and Hispanics were more likely to perceive police bias. Additionally, their analyses showed that blacks and Hispanics differed significantly in their responses, with blacks showing significantly more negative attitudes towards police. (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004, 2005). In the 2005 research, Weitzer and Tuch concluded that a strong driver of the differences is the belief of the individual that policing operates impartially. While the majority of whites believe that the policing systems treat citizens equivalently regardless of race, over 44% of blacks “thought that blacks are discriminated against a lot in America. (pg. 307)” They also found that the black respondents in the survey had more personal contact with the police in comparison to whites and Hispanics (Weizer & Tuch, 2005). Similar results can as well be found in more concentrated studies. For example, Lurigio, Greenleaf, and Flexon (2009) conducted a survey of Latino and African

American youths. Their study found that police treatment and the perceived level of respect given by the police officer were strong drivers of attitudes towards police in both the African American and Hispanic participants. While contact with police had minimal effect, the attitudes and perceived treatment during contact was a key variable (Lurigio et al, 2009).

A recent survey by Pew Research Center (2016) also focused primarily on a comparison between blacks and whites regarding confidence towards police performance. Other minority groups were not included in the survey study. The Pew survey found that only 14% of the black respondents indicated a “lot” of confidence in police performance as compared to 42% of whites with high confidence in their community police (Morin & Stepler, 2016). The survey also considered specific elements theorized to shape attitudes and opinions, including correct use of force, equality in treatment of different races, and police officer accountability. In all of these three elements, black respondents were half as likely as the white respondents to have favorable views of police performance.

In contrast to the majority of findings indicating a more negative attitude towards police and policing by minorities, there have been a few studies conducted in specific geographic areas that showed African Americans with higher favorability perceptions of police than did Caucasian participants or that did not show a significant difference in attitudes based on race. Frank, Brandl, Cullen, and Stichman (1996) found that in Detroit, Michigan, African Americans held more favorable opinions of the police than their Caucasian counterparts. Their study determined this was because of a racial shift within the Detroit Police Department. At the time the Mayor, Police Chief, and nearly 50% of the police force was African American. The study concludes that African Americans had better perceptions and interactions with police because interactions were often with an officer within their own racial demographic. (Frank et al, 1996). Lee and

Gibbs (2015) showed that, when social distance is included with race in a model to predict attitudes towards police, race is insignificant. The greater the perceived separation between individuals and the police, the less significant race becomes. “Social distance mediates the relationship between race and confidence in the police (Lee & Gibbs, 2015, pg. 318)”. These findings support the investigation of the interacting effect of race based on other key variables.

Many of the studies on public and citizen attitudes towards police, such as the study by Frank et al. in Detroit Michigan (1996) have considered race as an independent factor without consideration of other extraneous factors that may be confounded with race or inclusion of other factors that might interact significantly with race, such as gender, age, and locality. As emphasized by Cao, Frank, and Cullen (1996), “These sentiments are not displayed equally across all sectors of the social order.” As illustrated through the literature discussed in this review, many studies have considered only main effects with limited context or have evaluated multivariate relationships with limited variables or range of variables (Cao et al., 1996). As a result, this study does not focus merely on white vs. black attitudes, but includes other individual-level factors that may impact perceptions with college-aged students, including gender, level of contact with police, type of contact, family and individual political views.

### **Primary Factor Three: Citizen Contacts with Police**

In Brown and Benedict’s review of findings related with public perceptions of the police, they summarized the results of several studies indicating that positive contacts with police resulted in more positive perceptions and negative contacts with the police had more negative impacts (Brown et al., 2002). Specifically, Scaglio and Condon found that citizen contacts with police had a greater impact on satisfaction with police performance than did age, race or

socioeconomic status (Scaglione et al., 1980). A study in 1997 found that citizens who received traffic citations had more negative evaluations of state police officers (Reisig et al., 1997). In 2000, a study by Cheurprakobkit showed that individuals who initiated the police contact had more positive attitudes for the police, while those who had police contacts that were initiated by the police were less satisfied with police performance (Cheurprakobkit, 2000). Hence, there is much historical evidence to support the theory that the amount and type of contact with the police has a significant impact on one's perception of how well the police perform their duties and whether or not one trusts the police. While there were inconsistent measures of police contact in the reviewed studies, most of the studies that investigated the relationship between attitudes towards the police and contact with the police confirmed the negativity bias theory that "bad is stronger than good" (Li et al., 2015, p. 109).

More recently, Alberton and Gorey (2018) published a systematic, broad review on both published and unpublished research studies associated with factors impacting citizen attitudes towards police performance. Their review, including 29 studies from the United States and four studies from Canada, indicated that contact with police was a stronger predictor of attitudes towards police than was race (Alberton et al., 2018). They did indicate limitations in how "contact with police" was measured, as the majority of studies did not specifically identify types and nature of the contexts. One key study included in the review of Alberton and Gorey was that of Li, Ren, and Luo (2015). The study by Li, Ren, and Luo (2015) was based on phone interviews with 1,143 residents from Houston, Texas and focused on public satisfaction with police (PSWP). Their study made two key contributions to the existing research in this area. First, they found that "police-citizen contact is considered as an important if not the most important factor that affects the levels of PSWP in America" (Li et al., 2015, p. 110). Secondly,

they concluded that degree of negative contact, such as arrest vs reprimand, significantly impacted the response. Finally, they concluded that the interrelationship between the type of contact, perception of that contact, and other extraneous factors, such as race and political conservatism, were key determinants of PSWP. The relationship between political conservatism and confidence in the police had been investigated earlier in a study by Stack and Cao (1998) that indicated a strong relationship between political views and confidence in police.

### **Public Views on Incarceration and Sentencing**

There is a key relationship between public perceptions of police performance, attitudes towards police, and fear in American citizens. This relationship extends from attitudes towards police to public attitudes on arrests and incarceration for violent and non-violent crimes and for capital punishment. Tyler (1988) wrote a foundational paper on the criteria that citizens used to determine the fairness of the police and the courts. Tyler's background study included 652 respondents to a survey conducted in the Chicago area; 31% of the respondents had been stopped by the police and 23% had been to court. Tyler suggested that perceptions of fairness were "largely consistent within particular settings" and that there was not much difference individual-to-individual (Tyler, 1988, p. 132). These results supported the theory that there was a large impact of locality and community perceptions of justice and fairness in citizens' attitudes towards both the police practices as well as the decisions by the courts in arrest situations.

Following Tyler's (1998) study, a lot of the research focused on the fairness of procedural justice as opposed to the public perceptions regarding arrests and incarceration. Hence, there exists a gap in studies specifically addressing factors that impact public perceptions of incarceration and arrests for various types of crime. However, with the public and media

attention concerning increasing crime rates in the 1990s, several studies focused on the increasing support of the public for capital punishment and the death penalty (Durham, 1996; Ellsworth, 1994; Sandys et al., 1995). Following the focus on capital punishment, some research on attitudes towards incarceration focused on niche groups, such as specific races or age groups. More recently, with the explosion in prison and jail populations, more attention has been given to public views of incarceration. Hetey and Eberhardt (2014) studied the impact of the racial differences in incarceration rates, particularly for Blacks, on public views. They also investigated disparities within the individual institutions. A key finding of this study was that “exposing people to extreme racial disparities in the prison population heightened their fear of crime and increased acceptance of the very policy that led to those disparities” (Hetey et al., 2014, p. 1952). Fear of crime and avoidance of victimization led to an acceptance of the very policies that created the racial disparities within the institutions. This study led to a focus on the interactions between the racial make-up of a community, public fear of crime and victimization, and the attitude towards the policies that lead to incarceration.

Recently, with the focus on the over-population of prisons, there has been a lot of political and media attention towards reformation as a solution as opposed to imprisonment. A recent study by Aaron Gottlieb (2017) was designed to understand the impact of how messages regarding reform and incarceration impacted public attitudes. The study was an experiment conducted on the internet where individuals were delivered specific messaging frameworks, including messages on fairness, costs of incarceration, high rates of recidivism, etc., and found that public views were correlated to the type of crime – drug offenses versus property offenses versus parole violations – as well as the type of message received. Finally, demographic



variables that were found to be statistically significant in affecting public attitudes towards incarceration were gender, household income, and political party. (Gottlieb, 2017)

The factors that have been shown to impact public attitudes towards police and policing overlap greatly with those that impact attitudes towards incarceration. Factors that have the greatest impact are often associated with locality and type of community, including fear of crime, political conservatism or liberalism, amount of racial diversity, and socio-economic conditions.

In this study, we will investigate the relationship between the three main factors –race, age, and police contacts – as well as including additional factors that may impact attitudes towards police and incarceration. The survey will include frequency and nature of contacts with police, political views, academic class, and general views on the criminal justice system.

### **Chapter Three: Methods**

To research the attitudes of students towards police and the connections to their views on incarceration, this research will use primarily qualitative methods. Along with this, the study will be conducted using the study design of a cross sectional survey to compare and contrast student attitudes between the two research topics. The study design is set up in the correct framework to successfully be used in answering the research questions of this study. The research questions posed in this study are listed as:

R1: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police between males and females?

R2: Is there a significant relationship between attitudes toward police and age?

R3: Is there a significant difference in attitude toward police between whites and racial minorities?

R4: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police between students who have an academic major of criminal justice and students who have an academic major in another field?

R5: Is there a significant difference between attitudes toward police based on the respondent's academic class?

R6: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between males and females?

R7: Is there a significant relationship between perceptions of incarceration and age?

R8: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between whites and racial minorities?

R9: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between students who have an academic major of criminal justice and students who have an academic major in another field?

R10: Is there a significant difference between perceptions of incarceration based on the respondent's academic class?

R11: Is respondent's perception of incarceration influenced by their fear of crime.

### Sample

The sample gathered for this research consists of students at East Tennessee State University. Within the University, the majority of the sample comes from within the Criminal Justice Department. In regards to this, the Criminal Justice Department was the most accessible for the ability to administer the survey and gather data. In essence sample selection was chosen by three factors. These three factors being my own participation in the Criminal Justice Department, accessibility granted by the department, and the perceived familiarity criminal justice students have over the research ideas. The expected size of the sample is anticipated around 100 to 150 students.

With the population being primarily criminal justice majors and minors, the sample is thoroughly representative of the Criminal Justice Department as a whole. However this sample, will likely not be representative of the University population as a whole. The expected lapses in representation are anticipated to be racial demographics and political leanings. These biases are unproblematic however, as the research has a distinct interest on criminal justice students. The study will compare and contrast the extensive data from criminal justice majors with any members of the sample population that participate in other majors. Therefore, the sample

selection technique adequately suits the creation of a sample necessary for the conducted research.

### Instrumentation

The Instrument selected for this study is a paper survey consisting of 26 questions overall that are separated into four distinct sections. The four sections consist of questions on participant demographics, attitudes towards police, encounters with police, and views on the justice system primarily dealing with incarceration. Each of these sections are clearly separated in the survey with brief descriptions of the sections preceding each set of questions. The purpose of these distinct sections is to gauge differences and similarities between the question sets. This analysis is enhanced by the demographic questions to further explore correlations within the data.

The survey is created in manner that allows it to be completed promptly to hold the focus of the research subjects. Along with this, the instrument allows for a quick gathering of data intended for the class room setting. A paper survey is also perceived to have a greater capability of gathering data in the class room setting in comparison to an online survey. The rationale for this is that there is no reliance for all students to have an electronic device capable of taking the survey at the time of survey administration.

The variables of the study are well met by the content of the survey. All variables needed to answer the research questions of the study are contained within the different question sets. The primary variables that are addressed through the question sets are race, academic major, police contact, along with the research focus on attitudes towards police and perceptions of the justice system. To gauge responses to the questions, the majority of all sections besides the Demographic section feature either a Yes/No response or ask for a response along an agreement scale. The exception to this is two questions under the police contact section that requires the

participant to fill in the answer. The scale for the agreement questions consist of four options. The options are listed as follows.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

The removal of the often used middle “indifferent” option is to further advance the data set by removing non-answers and encouraging participants to state a belief. The option of not answering a question will be made clearly available however in the question set descriptions. Anonymity will as well be protected through the lack of need of participant names and secure handling of all data retrieved in the research process. The survey section that gauges fear of crime is also asked on a scale. However, fear of crime is responded to by the participant selecting 1-10 on their level of fearfulness. 1 in this scale is least fearful, while 10 represents the most fearful option. Overall, the survey properly allows for timely data collection, along with enabling clear feedback responses to gauge in the data analysis.

### Data Collection

Data collection for this study was accomplished by administering the survey instrument in various ETSU classes over a two week span in the spring semester of 2020. All classes that the survey was administered in had the pre-approval of the class’ professor. At the beginning or end of a class’ time slot I administered the paper survey to the students in attendance. A statement guaranteeing anonymity and protection of any given data was read before the surveys are passed out. Along with this a statement stating that participation is not required was be given to those in attendance. Any students that by any means participated in another class were asked

to abstain from completing the survey a second time. Surveys were then be passed out by hand to all students in attendance. Students were asked to answer all questions using a pen or pencil and to clearly mark all given responses. Upon completion, all completed surveys were collected and secured.

The procedures of collecting data allow for direct access to the population of interest. The data needed was also unhindered through the methods of collection. All participants as well had the stated option of non-participation. Overall, the given procedures allowed for easy participation, accessibility to the studied populace, and concise timeliness.

### Data Analysis

This study analyzed the survey data the using the four following instruments: independent samples t-test, Pearson r correlation, ANOVA, and regression analysis. The independent samples t-test will be used for research questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 9. Research questions 2 and 7 were analyzed using the Pearson r correlation. For research questions 5 and 10 ANOVA was used for analysis. Research question 11's results was synthesized through a Pearson r correlation.

### Limitations

The limitations of this study can be seen in three areas. The areas that show a limit to this study are the reliance on self-reported data, overall sample size, and the lack of ability to generalize the gathered data to a larger population.

The reliance on self-reported data does inhibit the ability to guarantee the validity of all data. There is an element of trust placed on students being truthful with their provided answers. This is a concern primarily held in the survey questions regarding personal contact and experiences with police. This is a concern with all studies that rely on self-reported data that

influences correlations and data analysis. Therefore, the first limit of the current study is the inability to have 100% confidence of the validity of all data collected.

The sample size for this study's research also presents another limitation. The desired number of participants would be preferably larger to be able to have a higher confidence variable for the data findings. The smaller sample size also inhibits the overall ability to generalize this study to a larger population as a whole. Lack of accessibility and a method to reach the university as a whole prevents a sample that thoroughly stretches beyond the criminal justice department.

A byproduct of a small sample size in primarily one specific academic department creates the limit and inability to accurately generalize this study to the rest of the university population as a whole. This includes the inability to have perfect representation among certain demographic characteristics. Key demographical concerns for this in regards to accurate representation are race and political leanings. These are to be slanted towards a largely Caucasian and right leaning political sample.

## **Chapter Four: Analysis of Survey Results**

The attitude of college students towards the police and concerning incarceration was investigated using a survey tool administered to 178 students enrolled in college at East Tennessee State University. The survey was administered at the start of Spring 2020 semester. The respondents were all students taking courses in criminal justice. The survey was presented to the respondents in paper copy format as provided in Appendix A. The 178 respondents were administered the survey in person in a classroom setting and voluntarily consented to complete the survey. The survey, consisting of 66 questions, measured six demographic attributes of the respondents that served as independent variables in the comparative analyses:

- Age
- Gender
- Race
- Academic Major (criminal justice or non-criminal justice)
- Academic Class
- Political Affiliation

The survey also included four binary-response (i.e., yes/no) variables to determine if the respondents felt fear or perceived abused during encounters with the police. A four-point Likert scale was used to measure the degree of agreement on statements regarding attitudes towards police offices and perceptions on incarceration. A 10-point scale was used to measure level of fear felt by the respondents in regards to certain crimes. Finally, two questions were included with open-ended, numeric responses to measure the respondent's frequency of encounters with police officers.



Table 1. Distributions of Qualitative Demographic Variables

Variable		Frequency	Percentage of Total
Gender <i>(Total=178)</i>	Male	65	36.52%
	Female	111	62.36%
	Other	2	1.12%
Academic Class <i>(Total=178)</i>	Freshman	37	20.79%
	Sophomore	44	24.72%
	Junior	57	32.02%
	Senior	40	22.47%
Academic Major <i>(Total=167)</i>	Criminal Justice	119	71.26%
	Other than Criminal Justice	48	28.74%
Race <i>(Total=178)</i>	White, non-Hispanic	148	83.15%
	Hispanic	5	2.81%
	Asian	3	1.69%
	Black	16	8.99%
	Native American	4	2.25%
	Other	2	1.12%
Political Affiliation	Democrat	37	21.89%

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<i>(Total=169)</i>	Republican	76	44.97%
	Independent	44	26.04%
	Other	12	7.10%

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Given that an individual's personal experience with police and incarceration is known to impact their attitudes towards police and the justice system (Li et al., 2015), the respondents were asked to provide quantitative responses about the number of direct encounters that they had with police and the percentage of encounters initiated by the police as opposed to by the individual. Of the 178 respondents, 39% had no encounters with the police in the year prior to taking the survey. Of all respondents, 89.8% had four or less encounters with the police. On average, 79.2% of the encounters were police-initiated as opposed to 20.8% being initiated by the respondents. As shown in the charts provided in Figure 2, only 7.87% responded "yes" that the police had been verbally abusive in an encounter, and only 14% of respondents stated that they had been mistreated by a police officer. On the other hand, a much larger percentage, 39%, responded that potential encounters with police scared them, and 41% stated that they knew someone that had been mistreated by a police officer.

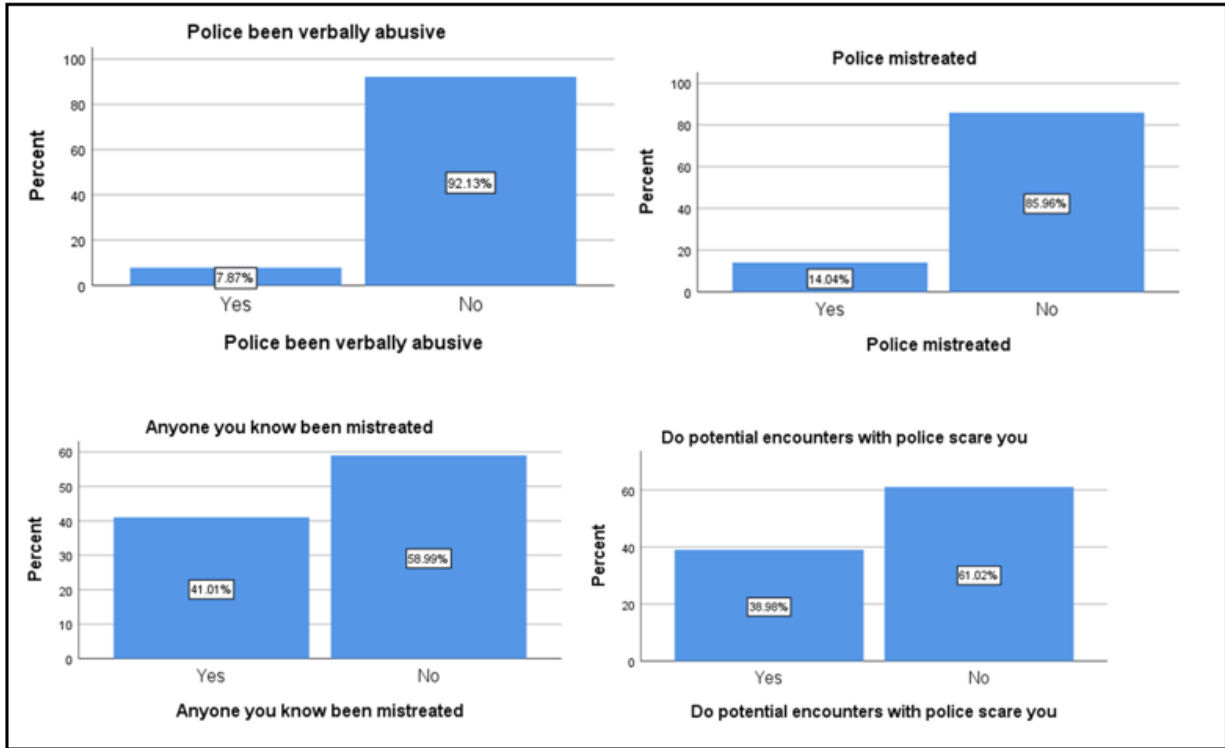


Figure 1. Personal Encounters with Police

The dependent variables in the study measured attitudes towards police based on six items with ordinal responses. The descriptive statistics for the responses to these items are provided in Table 2. These variables measured the degree of agreement about police having the best interests of individuals in mind, treating everyone fairly regardless of race, being corrupt, having accountability for their misconduct, and doing a good job preventing crime. The mode for five of these six variables was a 3 (on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 representing strong agreement); the modal response for police treating individuals fairly regardless of race or skin color was a 2.

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mode</b>
Police officers have individual's best interests in mind (n=177)	2.95	.698	3
Police officers treat people fairly regardless of skin color (n=175)	2.14	.730	2
Corruption is common for police (n=174)	2.70	.733	3
Police officers are trustworthy and honest (n=176)	2.91	.626	3
Police officers are held accountable (n=174)	2.64	.839	3
Police officers prevent crime (n=177)	2.73	.701	3

*Table 2.* Dependent Variables Measuring General Attitudes toward Police

In investigating the relationship between fear of crime and perceptions with regards to incarceration, the dependent variables, perceptions on incarceration, were based on five items measured with an ordinal scale from one to four, with one being 'strongly disagree' and four being 'strongly agree'. These five variables and the resulting descriptive statistics for each are provided in Table 3. These variables measured the degree of agreement with statements concerning prisons and incarceration. Of the respondents 89.3% either agreed or strongly agreed that prisons are necessary to help protect society, and 60.8% responded with disagreement that only violent criminals should be incarcerated. However, 83.7% disagreed with the statement that incarceration punishes equally, and 60.1% did not agree that the U.S. criminal justice system does a good job with the "punishment fitting the crime". The independent variable was measured using ten 10-point Likert scales focused on the respondents' fears of ten specific crimes with various degrees of violence, from being approached by a beggar to being murdered.

The level of fear expressed by the respondents differed by type of crime as seen in the side-by-side boxplots depicted in Figure 3. The associated descriptive statistics for each crime are provided in Table 4.

*Table 3. Dependent Variables Measuring Attitudes in Regards to Incarceration*

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mode</b>
Prisons are necessary to protect society (n=178)	3.20	.698	3
The United States incarcerates and punishes individuals equally (n=178)	1.82	.782	2
Only perpetrators of violent crimes should be sent to prison (n=176)	2.43	.760	2
Correctional facilities rehabilitate offenders (n=176)	2.10	.776	2
Punishment fits the crime (n=178)	2.28	.744	2

*Table 4. Level of Fears Associated with Specific Crimes*

<b>Level of Fear for Specified Crime</b>			
<i>175 Responses</i>			<b>Interquartile</b>
<i>(Scale from 1: No Fear to 10: Most Fearful)</i>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Range (IQR)</b>
Approached on street by a beggar	3	1	4
Cheated, conned, or swindled out of money	4	2	4
Having someone break into home while away	6	10	5
Having someone break into home while at home	7	10	5
Raped or sexually assaulted	8	10	7

Being murdered	8	10	6
Attacked with a weapon	7	10	5
Having car stolen	4	8	5
Robbed on street	5	8	4
Having property vandalized	3	1	5

### Research Question 1

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in attitudes towards police between males and females?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the attitudes towards police between male and female respondents.

The dependent variable representing the respondent attitude towards police was obtained by aggregating the individual scores across the six survey items used to measure the respondents' attitudes towards police. A two-sample t-test for the equality of means was performed to evaluate the statistical significance in the difference of the average score for male and females. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was not a significant difference in the general attitude towards police officers for male students ( $M=16.52$ ,  $SD=2.36$ ) and female students ( $M=15.88$ ,  $SD=2.45$ );  $t(167) = 1.67$ ,  $p=.097$ , 95% CI [-0.12, 1.40]. Therefore, there was inconclusive evidence to reject the null hypothesis. In summary, there is no evidence that the general attitude of the student respondents is significantly different between males and females.

### Research Question 2

Research Question 2: Is there a significant relationship between the scores measuring attitudes towards police and age of respondent? The null hypothesis associated with this research question is that there is no relationship between the dependent variable and age. The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: The correlation coefficient between the measured score of attitudes towards police and the respondent's age is zero, or there is no significant correlation between the score of attitudes towards police and age.

Pearson's correlation coefficient,  $r$ , revealed a negative correlation that was not significant. In order to evaluate the statistical significance in the difference of the average score for male and females, a t-distribution test statistic was used with 175 degrees of freedom. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was not a significant correlation between the attitudes toward police score and the age of the respondent ( $r=-0.119$ ;  $t(175) = 1.55$ ,  $p=.124$ ). Therefore, we retain the null hypothesis and conclude that there was insufficient evidence in the sample results to conclude that there is a linear association between age and the general attitude of the student respondents towards police.

### Research Question 3

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police between whites and racial minorities?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the attitudes towards police between white and racial minority respondents.

A two-sample t-test for the equality of mean score for attitudes towards police was performed to evaluate the statistical significance in the difference between the two racial groups. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was a significant difference in the general attitude towards police officers between white students ( $M=16.35$ ,  $SD=2.38$ ) and racial minority students ( $M=14.83$ ,  $SD=2.28$ );  $t(169) = 3.16$ ,  $p=.002$ , 95% CI [0.57, 2.48]. Therefore, there was sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant difference between the attitudes towards police between white and minority respondents.

#### Research Question 4

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police between students with a criminal justice academic major and students with an academic major in a different field?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the attitudes towards police between criminal justice majors and non-criminal justice majors.

A two-sample t-test for the equality of mean score for attitudes towards police was performed to evaluate the statistical significance in the difference between the students majoring in criminal justice and students in other academic majors. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was a statistically significant difference in the general attitude towards police officers between criminal justice students ( $M=16.39$ ,  $SD=2.32$ ) and racial minority students ( $M=15.48$ ,  $SD=2.55$ );  $t(159) = 2.19$ ,  $p=.03$ , 95% CI [0.091, 1.73]. Therefore, there was sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis and conclude a difference in attitudes towards police between criminal justice students and students with other academic majors.



### Research Question 5

Research Question 5: Is there a significant difference in attitudes toward police based on the respondent's academic class?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: The average score of the attitude towards police is the same across all academic classes

A one-way analysis of variance with an F-test was performed to compare the average scores between the academic classes. There were four levels of academic classes – freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. The F-ratio was significant at an  $\alpha=.05$ ,  $F(3,167)=3.074$ ,  $p=.029$ . Hence, we reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the classes and conclude that at least one of the class average score was different from the others. A post-hoc multiple comparison was performed using Tukey's HSD in order to determine which of the classes differ from the others. The difference in mean scores measuring attitudes towards police between the sophomore and senior classes was statistically significant with a mean difference of 1.57 [SE(.527),  $p=.018$ , 95% CI (0.20, 2.94)].

### Research Question 6

Research Question 6: Is there a significant difference perceptions regarding incarceration between males and females?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the perceptions towards incarceration between male and female students.

The dependent variable representing the respondent perceptions regarding incarceration in the United States justice system was obtained by aggregating the individual scores across the five survey items used to measure the respondents' perceptions towards incarceration. A two-sample t-test for the equality of mean score was performed. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was not a statistically significant difference in the views of incarceration between male (M=12.17, SD=2.53) and female students (M=11.65, SD=2.11);  $t(159) = 1.46$ ,  $p=.146$ , 95% CI [-0.183, 1.226]. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. There is not a statistically significant difference in the perceptions regarding incarceration in the U.S. between male and female students.

#### Research Question 7

Research Question 7: Is there a significant relationship between perceptions of incarceration and age?

The null hypothesis associated with this research question is that there is no relationship between the dependent variable and age:

Ho: The correlation coefficient between the measured score of perception towards incarceration and age is zero.

Based on Pearson's correlation coefficient,  $r$ , a t-distribution test statistic was calculated based on 175 degrees of freedom. With  $\alpha=.05$ , the negative linear association between the perceptions regarding incarceration and the age of the respondent ( $r=-0.205$ ;  $t(175) = 2.48$ ,

$p=.007$ ) was statistically significant. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there was a significant relationship between perceptions regarding incarceration and age.

#### Research Question 8

Research Question 8: Is there a significant difference perceptions regarding incarceration between whites and racial minorities?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the perceptions towards incarceration between white and racially minority students.

A two-sample t-test for the equality of mean score was performed. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was not a statistically significant difference in the views of incarceration between white ( $M=11.90$ ,  $SD=2.30$ ) and minority students ( $M=11.52$ ,  $SD=2.10$ );  $t(173) = 0.838$ ,  $p=.403$ , 95% CI [-0.524, 1.298]. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. There is not a statistically significant difference in the perceptions regarding incarceration between white and racially minority students.

#### Research Question 9

Research Question 9: Is there a significant difference in perceptions towards incarceration between students with a criminal justice major and students with a major in another field?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: There is no significant difference in perceptions regarding incarceration between students with criminal justice majors and students with majors in other fields.

A two-sample t-test for the equality of mean score for attitudes towards police was performed to evaluate the statistical significance in the difference between the average score

measuring general perceptions towards incarceration between the students majoring in criminal justice and students in other academic majors. Based on a Type I error of .05, there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions towards incarceration between criminal justice students ( $M=12.18$ ,  $SD=2.28$ ) and racial minority students ( $M=11.28$ ,  $SD=1.94$ );  $t(162) = 2.39$ ,  $p=.018$ , 95% CI [0.16, 1.65]. Therefore, there was sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis and conclude a difference in perceptions regarding incarceration between criminal justice students and students with other academic majors.

#### Research Question 10

Research Question 10: Is there a significant difference between the perceptions of incarceration based on the respondent's academic class?

The null hypothesis for this test is as follows:

Ho: The average score of the perceptions towards incarceration is the same across all academic classes.

A one-way analysis of variance with an F-test was performed to compare the average scores measuring perceptions about incarceration between the academic classes. There were four levels of academic classes – freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. The F-ratio was significant at an  $\alpha=.05$ ,  $F(3,171)=5.083$ ,  $p=.002$ . Hence, we reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the classes and conclude that at least one of the class average scores measuring perceptions towards incarceration was different from the others. A post-hoc multiple comparison was performed using Tukey's HSD in order to determine which of the classes differ from the others. The difference in mean scores measuring perceptions about incarceration was significantly different between the freshman and senior classes [mean difference=1.34,  $SE=.507$ ,

$p=.044$ ] as well as between the sophomore and senior classes [mean difference=1.83, SE=.481,  $p=.001$ ].

### Research Question 11

Research Question 11: Is respondent's perception of incarceration influenced by their fear of crime?

The null hypothesis associated with this research question is that there is no relationship between perception of incarceration and fear of crime;

Ho: The correlation coefficient between the measured score of perception towards incarceration and age is zero.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was close to zero with  $r=.029$ . Hence, there is insufficient evidence to conclude a relationship between fear of crime and perception of incarceration [ $r=.029$ ,  $t(173) = 0.540$ ,  $p=.705$ ]. Therefore, we retain the null hypothesis.

The data analysis found that 5 of the research questions revealed statistically significant relationships. Those with statistically significant relationships are questions 3,4,5,7, and 10. The following section will be a discussion on the finding of each research question. This will involve contrasting and comparing this study's results with prior research. Study limitations will also be included in the final chapter discussion.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gauge the perceptions of college students towards police and the justice system. This chapter includes a discussion of findings as related to the literature on perceptions of the police and the justice system. Along with this, study limitations and the potential for future research will be included. This research study was comprised of 11 research questions. Research Questions 1,3,4,6,8, and 9 were analyzed using an independent samples t-test. Questions 2, 7 and 11 were analyzed using the Pearson r correlation. For research questions 5 and 10 ANOVA was used to analyze. Upon completion of the data analyzation, research questions 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 were all found to have some degree of statistical significance.

Research question 1 asked if there was a significant difference in attitudes towards police between males and females. The data analysis revealed in this study that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in their attitudes towards police. This finding is in line with the general uncertainty of gender's role in determining an individual's attitude towards police. In a 2000, study women were found to have more favorably opinions on police than their male counterparts (Cheurprakobit, 2000). Contrasting this, a 1996 study that found males to have the more favorably view of police (Correia et al, 1996).

Research question 2 asked if there was a significant relationship between attitudes towards police and age. This study found no significant relationship between a respondent age and their attitude towards police. This is interesting as in the majority of prior research age has been shown to be a fairly consistent indicator of an individual's attitude towards police. Cao Frank and Cullen (1996), Cheurprakobkit (2000), Correia, Reisig, and Lovrich (1996) and Lim (2015) all found that younger individuals had lower perceptions of police than their older counterparts. Lim (2015) had a similar sample population to this study in using college

students for the study respondents. Therefore, the difference between this study's outcome and the other mentioned research cannot be attributed to just a more concentrated age pool.

Research question 3 asked if there was a significant relationship between racial minorities and whites in their attitudes towards police. This study found that in fact there was a significant relationship with racial minorities having a statistically significant lower perception of police. The finding is fairly standard with the majority of research conducted on race and perceptions of police ( Baker et al, 1983, Tuch & Weitzer, 1997, 2005, Correia et al, 1996). Several other studies have also showed the intersection between race and age. Younger minorities have lower perceptions of police even in comparison to older minorities (Brunson, 2007, Brunson & Weitzer, 2009, Gau & Brunson, 2010). This study being having a younger population sample with a mean of 21 years old connects most with this prior research.

Research question 4 asked if there was a significant difference in attitudes towards police between those with an academic major of criminal justice and those who had other academic majors. The result to this question found a difference in attitudes between criminal justice students and students with other academic majors. Criminal justice students were found to have better perceptions of police. This runs in contrast to a 2000 study conducted by Tsoudis that showed criminal justice majors to have lower perceptions of police than their other academic major counterparts. Outside of the 2000 study, there is not extensive research on academic major effects on police perceptions. Similar to this study, the 2000 study also only sampled a single university population (Tsoudis,2000). Further research is needed in this area to further determine whether academic major affects perceptions on police.

Research question 5 asked if there is a significant difference in attitudes towards police based on a respondent's academic class. The test found that a significant difference did exist

between academic sophomores and academic seniors. This is unique as other significant relationships were not found between the other academic classes. Other research dissecting inter-academic class attitudes towards police is sparse. Further research is needed to further dissect police attitudes between specific academic classes.

Research question 6 asked if there is a significant difference in the perceptions of incarceration between males and females. There was no found significant relationship between the genders. In general research on attitudes towards incarceration is thin. However, Gottlieb in 2017 did find that gender statistically impacted an individual's view on incarceration. This runs in contrast to this research's finding. Further research is needed to definitively determine genders role on the impact of incarceration perceptions.

Research question 7 asked if there was a significant relationship between perceptions of incarceration and age. There was in fact a significant relationship between age and perception of incarceration. This is unique as age has largely been unstudied in research involving perceptions of incarceration. To further confirm this study's finding, further research will be needed to solidify the result. It is a similar result to research question 2 that used age as its variable but found no significant relationship. However, theoretically it would fall in line with the significance of age in perceptions of police in other research (Cao Frank and Cullen (1996), Cheurprakobkit (2000), Correia, Reisig, and Lovrich (1996) and Lim (2015). The connection between age and incarceration perception is in need of further exploring.

Research question 8 asks if there is a significant difference in perceptions of incarceration between racial minorities and whites. Surprisingly, attitudes towards incarceration between racial minorities and whites was found to have no statistically significant relationship. This runs in contrast to the majority of criminal justice research that shows race being a key factor on an



individual's attitudes. Johnson et al in 2017 stated that there is a profound racial divide in America when it comes to attitudes involving the criminal justice system. So it is rather curious that no significant relationship was found in this study. This could be due to geographic factors or a general grouping of minorities for this study.

Research question 9 asked if there was a significant difference in perceptions on incarceration between those with a criminal justice major and those in other academic majors. This study did find a significant difference between students with criminal justice majors and students with other academic majors. Criminal justice majors had overall higher perceptions of incarceration than their counterparts. Similarly, Lim (2015) found academic major to have an effect on an individual's perceptions in regard to police and the justice system. There is however limited research directly in this area so it needs to be explored more.

Research question 10 asked if there is a significant difference between perceptions of incarceration. A statistically significant relationship was found in two combinations. Freshman to seniors and Sophomores to seniors were found to have differing views on incarceration. The strongest differences found between sophomores and seniors. With the general lack of research in inter-academic class perceptions there is nothing to compare this result to. However, freshman and sophomores generally tend to be younger than their senior counterparts. This can somewhat relate to age research that shows younger individuals having lower perceptions of police and incarceration than older individuals (Lim, 2015, Sethuraju et al, 2017).

Research question 11 asked if the respondent's perception of incarceration was influenced by their fear of crime. There was insufficient evidence to identify a relationship between the two. This is another area that there is not much research contributed to it. Further research is needed

here to generalize this study's finding that there is no significant connection between an individual's perception of incarceration and fear of crime.

### Limitations

This study had a few limitations that could be improved upon in future research to generalize findings. Primarily, the need to expand this research across multiple universities across a variety of geographic areas. This study used a single East Tennessee University to draw its sample from. Furthermore, individual racial diversity was limited in this study. Respondents were grouped into white and non-white categories. A more diverse sampling population would allow for conclusions to be drawn on distinct minority groups instead of a general grouping. A final primary limitation would be small sample sizes in some demographic categories. An example of this is the higher amount of criminal justice academic major respondents than non-criminal justice majors.

This study concentrated on finding the perceptions of ETSU students on police and incarceration. Many of this study's findings were found consistent to prior research on the topic. However, some findings proved to be unique. Understanding what the young college population believes in regards to police and incarceration is essential to understand American criminal justice policy in the near future. Many of the respondents will move into employment in the criminal justice field or become voters. As America's population ages and places a growing emphasis on the younger population, policy shifts will likely be in line with their beliefs. Further research is necessary to continually have the pulse of American beliefs on the criminal justice systems.



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