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HBO's *The Wire* and its Portrayal of Baltimore Politics, Schools, and the Judicial System in
Season 4: Was it Accurate then and Does it Stand the Test of Time?

By

Josephine Klingeman

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
the Department of Political Science

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Introduction

This thesis is a content analysis of HBO's fourth season of *The Wire*. After conducting an in-depth analysis of the content in the thirteen episodes of season four, I then assessed the level of accuracy in the show's portrayal of two major topics discussed throughout the season: Witness protection and police informant harassment. I did so by conducting several interviews with professionals who have several decades of experience working in the criminal justice system. I compared their personal experience with witness protection programs, witness harassment, and police informant harassment with the content presented in *The Wire* on these topics. Finally, I presented my own conclusions about the show's continued importance and relevance in the age of social and political activism in 2020 and 2021.

In Chapter One, I will present my literature review of the work already published on the relationship between American popular culture and the legal system in the United States, as well as the work published on *The Wire* itself. In Chapter Two, I will describe my methodology for my analysis process of season four of *The Wire* and the goals and expectations I had prior to beginning my research. In Chapter Three, I will present my analysis of season four and my overall findings of the show's portrayal of schools, the drug trade/criminal activity, law enforcement, and politics. In Chapter Four, I will present my process of interviewing several professionals who work in the criminal justice system and my findings from these interviews. In Chapter Five, I will finally conclude my thesis and suggest future directions for researchers to go in and how *The Wire* continues to remain relevant in 2021.

Chapter One: *American Popular Culture, Law, and The Wire*

In Chapter One, I will describe and define the relationship between American popular culture and the law. I will present the research done on the relationship between American popular culture and the United States systems of law by several academics. I will introduce the series HBO *The Wire* and explain why it is relevant to the topic of American popular culture and law.

The chapter includes a discussion on the impact popular culture has on the public's perception of the law. It also deconstructs and breaks down the show *The Wire* into various categories. These categories include the portrayal of systemic issues in *The Wire*, the show's discussion of judicial and political institutions, how professors have taught the show in their courses, and how the creators used real-life to shape the stories in the show.

American Popular Culture and Law

The public's interest in court proceedings as a form of entertainment is a past-time nearly as old as our country's establishment. The United States law systems have become the backbone of many television shows and film plot lines. Therefore, it is incredibly important to teach about the influence popular culture can have on the public's perceptions of our legal institutions and the implications that result. David Papke (2007, 1226) defines popular culture as "cultural commodities and experiences produced by the culture industry and marketed to mass audiences." Michael Asimow, a Stanford Law School professor, came up with a narrow definition of popular *legal* culture. He defines the term in both a broad and narrow sense. His broad definition of popular legal culture is as follows: "everything that people believe about law and lawyers" (Asimow 2019, 116). His narrow definition includes "media about legal subjects, such as movies or television shows about lawyers" (Asimow 2019, 116).

American popular culture and law are deeply intertwined. Humans create laws and popular culture for their societies. Law professors David Papke, Victoria Salzmann, and Philip Dunwoody all discuss their research on the impact law-related pop culture has on the public's perception of the law. Papke outlines his research in his publication, "The Impact of Popular Culture on American Perceptions of the Courts."

There has also been a distinction made between television and film regarding their portrayal of law in American popular culture. Niles and Mezey (2005) describe two key differences between television and film media when it comes to law. The first difference they discuss has to do with how the two mediums advertise and raise revenue. When it comes to films, directors and producers have to make movies with an audience in mind to turn a profit off of it. This means that the directors and producers do not rely so much on the reputation of the corporation who is behind the production of the movie, such as Disney, but rather on what they believe the audience will enjoy watching. Therefore, they have more leeway with what they produce. There are limits to this thought. Reputation does matter, but for corporations as large as Disney, Niles and Mezey (2005) explain that because so many other companies fall under their conglomerate, there is less emphasis on who the corporation is that owns the production company of the movie.

On the other hand, in regards to television, researchers Niles and Mezey (2005) make the point that television relies as heavily on corporations as they do on their advertisers, who produce revenue for them. Niles and Mezey (2005, 175) conclude that legal "programming leaves viewers all but completely free to direct their concern at their social status, which can only be raised by greater consumption" because legal television often made in the image of what audience members are already expecting to see based on previous shows they have watched

about similar topics.

Mark Niles and Naomi Mezey (2005) point out that the second key difference between legal television and legal film has to do with how long the plotline itself has to last. On television, a show producers' main goal is to make a show last as long as possible, which means maintaining the interest of an audience. That is why television shows about legal topics and institutions have to make the main characters well-liked and good at what they do, whether that is reality. By making the main characters objectively likable, the producers keep the viewers engaged, which keeps ratings and revenue high. On the other hand, movies are less concerned with keeping the audience interested in the future because they make a profit off of the one-time viewership (Niles and Mezey 2005, 176).

Michael Papke (2007) explained that the legal component to popular culture as a whole has to do with court-related television and films and the impact the two have on the public's opinion. In Papke's analysis of the impact popular culture has on the public's perception of court proceedings, he concluded that there is evidence to support his claim that court-related media impacts the public's perception of how court procedures work in reality. Papke stated "Jurors in real-life trials, it is alleged, have come to expect comparable evidence" and that specifically, "those who watch CSI take DNA evidence to be incontrovertible and also readily available" (2007, 1232). Papke posed an important question in his article, "Should something be done to reduce the impact of court-related popular culture on Americans' views of the courts and courtroom proceedings?" He offers his readers three suggestions on how we can minimize the impact that popular culture has on the public's view of the courts. Within these suggestions, Papke calls on legal professionals to educate the public on how the court system works in real life, instead of relying solely on the media for answers. His work established that there is reason

to believe there is a legitimate impact on the public's perception of the courts in the United States due to their court-related media (i.e., crime and court shows).

In contrast to Papke's (2007) research, which focuses on the impact of court-related media on the public, Victoria Salzman and Philip Dunwoody (2005) focused their research more on the concept of lawyering. While Papke, Salzman, and Dunwoody all looked at the media's portrayal of court procedures, Salzman and Dunwoody focused primarily on lawyering in and outside of the courtroom. What occurred in television and films outside of the courtroom with lawyer characters played a large role in their analysis. They found that there was limited evidence to support a link between the inaccurate portrayal of crime-related media on a "layperson's perception of lawyering" specifically (Salzman, Dunwoody, 2005, 414).

Salzman and Dunwoody's (2005) findings led them to conclude that there was little evidence to prove that the way lawyers are depicted in legal-related media influences the perception people have of lawyers in real life. Specifically, first-year law students' perceptions were more closely aligned to what lawyers do in reality than Salzman and Dunwoody initially believed. From their survey of first-year law students' perception of the accuracy of legal television, they found that the students made mostly correct assessments of what actually happens in real life versus in legal television. "First-year students estimated that lawyers spend less time in court than depicted on TV (9.77% vs. 23.26%), less time with clients than depicted on TV (11.41% vs. 30.59%), more time doing research than depicted on TV (16.39% vs. 0.09%), more time drafting than depicted on TV (12.63% vs. 0.13%) and more time strategizing than depicted on TV (11.49% vs. 3.46%)" (Salzman and Dunwoody 2005, 447). When Salzman and Dunwoody compared first-year law students to practicing lawyers' assessments to what lawyers do in reality, their findings showed that the students were much closer in their responses

to what the practicing lawyers claimed their profession does in real life. Salzman and Dunwoody's overall findings made the argument that first-year law students' perception of what lawyers do in reality was not heavily impacted, if at all, by the media's portrayal of lawyering. This finding remained the same, even for those they surveyed who consumed large quantities of legal television.

Others who have analyzed and dissected the relationship between law and American popular culture have also suggested that a large part of what we see on television regarding legal topics and institutions stems from what directors of these shows and films believe we viewers already think and therefore want to see more of. Mark Niles and Naomi Mezey (2005) discuss this in their article titled "Screening the Law: Ideology and Law in American Popular Culture." Alongside other scholars, they have assessed why we see the type of portrayal of law enforcement, judges, jurors, defendants, and lawyers in television shows. In their assessment, they have concluded that, for the most part, popular legal television shows portray judges and law enforcement as a heroic profession. Niles and Mezey state that legal shows reaffirm what the audience already feels about the legal system. These shows portray "attorneys and judges as heroic and capable defenders of justice, the legal system as predictably successful in punishing the culpable and vindicating the innocent and government officials as honest and hard-working public servants with the best interests of their constituents at heart" (Niles and Mezey 2005, 115).

Crime shows can also make audiences feel as though they are getting a behind the scenes look at a system that is, for the most part, hidden from them. Douglas Goodman (2006) makes the point that besides legal professionals, not many others see what truly happens in courtrooms and in legal conversations between lawyers and clients. Goodman (2006, 763) discussed how Michael Asimow and Shannon Mader made a well-founded case that popular legal culture, in

regards to television shows and films, can be both “empowering and hazardous” to the public. Goodman claims that educating the average person on legal procedures can be empowering in the sense that they are gaining exposure and knowledge to how the judicial system works, but it can also be hazardous at the same time because the accuracy of what these shows are displaying to viewers is not usually that realistic.

Teaching Law and Popular Culture’s Relationship and the Impact

Other scholars have also gone a step further to explain why there is a need to teach students in higher education institutions about their findings that the media portrays law enforcement in a certain light. Paul Joseph (2000) and other professors have focused on the benefits of teaching about the media’s impact on the public’s perception of the legal system. In Joseph’s opinion, there is a strong sense of importance placed on the need to teach students how to critically analyze legal television and films and understand their influence on our views of the legal procedures we participate in real life. Michael Asimow outlines a guide on teaching a course on popular culture and law in his piece *The Mirror and the Lamp: The Law and Popular Culture Seminar*. Asimow claims through his research that “pop culture never accurately reflects the world it depicts, for these are works of fiction, produced to entertain mass audiences and to make a profit” (Asimow 2019, 116). He later points out that “if movies usually show lawyers who are greedy and dishonest, this is evidence that many people share this view—or, at least, that filmmakers believe that they do” (Asimow 2019, 117). His overarching point retains that popular culture and law have a back and forth relationship. Asimow claimed that whether people were actively or passively consuming popular culture media, they were inevitably forming opinions about the characters and institutions depicted in that media. He argued that that is why lawyers need to know about the influence popular culture has over those who consume it. While

Asimow is not alone in his analysis of the impacts legal media has on the public, his article serves a greater purpose than just defining the relationship between legal popular culture and the public's perception of legal institutions and concepts. His paper goes a step further and details the ways in which he has taught courses on the impact and its implications.

These academics all shared the same belief that popular culture and law are inextricably linked, and it is important to analyze their relationship and its implications simultaneously. There were limitations to all of their research because of specific components to their study, such as who they surveyed and what they focused on specifically. Salzman and Dunwoody (2005) mentioned that their decision to survey first-year law students on their perceptions of what lawyers do compare to what popular culture portrays lawyers as doing was a limitation on their results because law students are predisposed to the profession of law and therefore have more informed assumptions about what lawyers do.

The Impact and Implication Crime Media has on the Public

As I mentioned previously through David Papke's work on the topic, the inaccurate portrayal of criminal procedure has been shown to sway the public's perception of how the court systems and trials should work versus how they actually work in reality. Shows give off the impression that criminal investigations and court proceedings are completed with "speed and efficiency" (Niles and Mezey 2005, 124). Mark Niles and Naomi Mezey (2005) discuss specifically how in the series *Law and Order*; trials and investigation happen in a matter of a few scenes. This inaccurate portrayal of how the judicial system works can lead to a jaded perception of how the system works in real life to those who are not familiar with the legal professions involved in the show. Crime shows and court television series present court proceedings at a much faster pace than they occur in real life, this is mainly because it results in more entertaining

content. It does not matter how factually accurate the procedure is in these television series, but rather how much revenue a network can produce off of a show through ratings and viewership (Niles and Mezey 2005). Kimberlianne Podlas completed a study to gauge how court television creates biases among jurors and the general public. What she discovered was that frequent viewers of courtroom shows (Judge Judy, The People's Court) expected an "active bench" which meant a vocal and opinionated Judge in court more frequently than non-frequent viewers, however, they both expected an active bench (Podlas 2001, 12). Overall, Podlas found that viewers of popular courtroom television expect the same behavior they see in court if they were to serve as jurors themselves. The issue with this, Podlas (2001, 15) claims, is that courtroom television is dramatized and inaccurate as compared to real-life court proceedings.

In sum, many scholars have analyzed the relationship between American popular culture and law and have explained why it is so important to understand their impactful relationship with one another. They have produced instructional guides on teaching courses that promote future generations to analyze the relationship and make better legal professionals in our law systems because of it. While the relationship between law and popular culture is imperfect, it is necessary and important to our society's well-being.

The Portrayal of Systemic Issues in The Wire

The Wire depicted the prevalent crime within impoverished neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland, the political and police corruption, and more throughout its five seasons. The show aired in June of 2002 and was completed in March of 2009. While the show is now revered by many as a great piece of literature, it never won an Emmy (Cormier, 2005). However, it did manage to obtain several other awards including, the TCA Heritage Award, the Writers Guild of America Award for Television: Dramatic Series, a Directors Guild of America Award for

Outstanding Directing – Drama Series, and a Peabody Award (IMDb, 2010). The show has also become a tool for academics at higher education institutions to teach various courses with. *The Wire* is a mixture of several crime genre components. It focuses on crime and law enforcement but it also addresses politics, poverty, failing school systems in Baltimore, and the media. The show focuses each season on a different issue, but there is a lot of overlap between topics and plot lines (Chaddah et al. 2008). New characters come into play each season while some remain the same throughout all five.

Television shows consistently portray crime and the judicial system inaccurately, we have seen from previous research how this is detrimental to the public's perception of these institutions. *The Wire*, on the other hand, has been noted as one of the most accurate portrayals of inner-city crime, police and political corruption, and the ways our government and society fail our poor communities every day. Many shows only touch on surface-level legal issues because they are only meant to entertain, not educate. *The Wire* digs below the surface. I will discuss the ways in which critics have examined the following subtopics, as portrayed in *The Wire*, how professors have used the series as an integral text in their courses at higher education institutions, and what scholars have to say about the show discussion of various political concepts such as neoliberalism and capitalism, as well as the judicial system as a whole.

Some have researched and discussed the link that *The Wire* has to neoliberalism. Younghoon Kim suggested that “In portraying the police as one of the deteriorated bureaucratic institutions that foster the production of outcasts, the show raises a strong sense of inequality and injustice in America,” and perpetuates the idea that these very injustices are a direct result of the “neoliberal state and capitalism” (Kim 2013, 190). Younghoon cites Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's “Baltimore as World and Representation: Cognitive Mapping and Capitalism in *The*

Wire” by stating that the two of them claim that the show is “one of the most cogent attempts” to depict “social space in our historic moment” and “the totality of class struggle on a global scale” (Kim 2013, 190). The belief held by some scholars is that *The Wire* portrays the neoliberal state and capitalism through its messages and stories about police and political corruption, racism, poverty, and more.

The Wire’s Discussion of Judicial and Political Institutions and the Communities They Patrol

Numerous academic commentators suggest that *The Wire*’s depiction of law enforcement and the political arena in Baltimore is accurate. Susan Bandes stated, “*The Wire* is indispensable for both its remarkable portrait of the criminal justice system and its demonstration that complexity and social context can make for a gripping tale” (Bandes 2010, 436). David Simon argued that the main goal of the series “was to show that the ‘system’” is broken and that it fails individuals and families” (Chaddah et al. 2001, 84). Simon does this by exposing the depleting labor job opportunities in the city of Baltimore, the rampant crime networks in impoverished, low-income housing neighborhoods, and corruption among political and judicial officials (Chaddah et al. 2001, 84).

In Bradley Hays’ “Jurispathic Baltimore? Law and Nomoi in *The Wire*,” he details how the communities in the show operate as well. Hays (2016, 531) stated, “They develop systems of rules that govern behavior and engage in discussions about what these norms require of the community. And while these communities vary significantly in their priorities and practices, they punish violations of their norms in various ways, including social ostracism, economic penalties, and physical violence.” Hays’ research depicts the communities in Baltimore who are involved in crime as having their own set of laws to abide by and enforce. He compares the state’s laws and codes with the ones that drug leaders and community members live by on the streets of the

city. His analysis heavily references something known as “nomoi,” which means social norms. He uses *The Wire* as a fictional case study to argue that the state often tries to compete with social norms within communities in the country. Hays’ research is a further example of academics providing evidence on how *The Wire* demonstrates an accurate portrayal of judicial institutions and sociopolitical issues in the United States.

Real-Life People Inspired Characters for The Wire

The plotlines throughout *The Wire* and the characters within the show were mostly, if not all, made from real-life accounts of actual events and people the creators of the show knew of. The creator of the show, David Simon, has explained on several occasions how the idea for the show came from real events he followed as a journalist for the Baltimore Sun. As Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer, and Roger Burrows (2011, 155) put it, “*The Wire*’s authenticity has been achieved by drawing on the experiences and knowledge gained by Simon’s career in journalism and Ed Burns’ police work and school teaching in Baltimore.” Ed Burns is one of the show’s other creators. His work with the police department and the school system in Baltimore enabled the show to have more ethos because many characters were based off of people he knew of or worked with. In their article titled “*The Wire* as Social Science-Fiction?” they work through the various elements that made the show a useful source to study sociological concepts from. They make the point that the show used reality in regards to the real people that inspired characters from and the legal procedural processes seen in the show to shape its narrative about Baltimore. Penfold-Mounce, Beer, and Burrows cite specific examples of how the show’s creators used experiences they knew of in their real lives to form the characters. The authors state that one of the detectives is based on a “Baltimore City Police homicide division detective Rick Requer,” and the main police informant character Bubbles “is based on an actual police

informant of the same name” (Penfold-Mounce, Beer, Burrows 2011, 159). However, not all the characters in the show are based on specific individuals. Instead, some are based on many people combined. Michael Asimow (2017) discussed the main lawyer in the series named Maury Levi. Asimow cites a quote from David Simon in which he explained that “anyone who is anyone in law enforcement in Baltimore knows the three or four guys Maury Levi is patterned on” (Asimow 2017, 4). This remark explains the accuracy on which David Simon wanted to base his characters off of.

The co-creators' use of real people to base the characters and plot line of the series undermines the potential stereotypes the show could have employed. Kecia Driver Thompson said, “rather than perpetuating stereotypes, *The Wire* systematically deconstructs and undermines them, even as it holds public institutions responsible for the damage they inflict on individuals” (Thompson 2012, 110). Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson claimed that *The Wire* “offers an in-depth examination of the decline of urban labor markets, crime and incarceration, the failure of the education system in low-income communities, and the inability of political institutions to serve the interests of the urban poor” (Chaddha, Wilson 2011, 164).

Teaching The Wire in Higher Education Institutions

In addition to these scholars, others have also examined the ways in which the show's ability to deconstruct institutions and tell stories that resemble accurate portrayals of the law make it one of the most important teaching tools in the present day to teach in law classes. Many have come to the conclusion that *The Wire* has become a useful teaching tool at higher education institutions to teach about the legal procedure and the political topics that *The Wire* discusses. The content of the show in many of these professors' courses is used as a starting point in discussing criminal procedure (Gallini, 2014), labor markets and incarceration (Lageson et al.,

2011), and more. Several scholars have written about how they use the show as a way of discussing important topics in their seminars and college courses. James Trier (2010) explains this concept in *Representations of Education in HBO's The Wire, Season 4*. Trier (2010) and others claim that the show is engaging for students and useful in telling a true story about the realities of injustice in our country.

Professors at Johns Hopkins University found that when *The Wire* was used during a seminar series about health disparities in communities throughout the country, "...the stories of *The Wire* also encouraged reflection and inquiry into the roles that Johns Hopkins and other local public health institutions have played in the social and historical development of contemporary urban health issues in Baltimore" (Buttress et al. 2013, 366). The impact of teaching *The Wire* to a community such as the students at Johns Hopkins has the ability to alter the state of inequality of another community such as the city of Baltimore and is therefore very useful.

Authors Amelia Buttress, Danielle German, David Holtgrave, and Susan G. Sherman make a claim that "*The Wire* created an important opening in the seminar series for public health professionals to reflect on our own institutions and discuss the challenges and opportunities to expand interdisciplinary engagement and promote practical applications" (Buttress et al. 2012, 366). The authors conclude by saying that the show's message can be used to urge healthcare professionals to look into ways to fix the disparities and issues we have in our American cities regarding healthcare.

Is The Wire a Complete Representation of Baltimore?

While the widely held opinion by critics is that *The Wire* is an accurate portrayal of not just the legal battles in the city of Baltimore, not every critic agrees. In an article by Peter Dreier and John Atlas (2009), they analyze whether the show is *too* cynical. In their piece, Dreier and

Atlas (2009) make the point that the show ignores the progress made in the city of Baltimore by remarkable people and organizations who have worked tirelessly to rebuild the city. The two authors state, “committed activists, who have persisted in the organizing through victories and disappointments, but never succumb to cynicism or corruption—were nowhere to be found in *The Wire*” (Dreier and Atlas 2009, 4). Not many have made this critique about the show, and yet it is an interesting take on the narrative peddled throughout the series. Dreier and Atlas present evidence of real activist groups and union groups based out of Baltimore who had accomplished several great feats throughout the timeline that *The Wire* was aired, yet the show itself never included any of these real-life events. The two authors question why David Simon and Ed Burns, the show’s co-creators, would leave out these important events that prove that there was hope for impoverished communities when their goal was to provoke change. They explain how various organizations such as BUILD, ACORN, and SEIU’s Justice for Janitors made large impacts for the impoverished communities *The Wire* focused on. BUILD successfully pushed for higher minimum wages, making both Baltimore and the state of Maryland pioneers in the nation with the first most progressive minimum wage laws and ordinances. In 2004, ACORN and another organization called the Algebra Project worked together to train parents and volunteers to help children with their education. The two organizations made a lot of progress for the Baltimore education system. Dreier and Atlas both remark that the education system was heavily discussed in *The Wire* during season 4, yet these organizations’ displays of activism were absent from the entire season despite their existence dating back several years before the season aired. In 2007, a group of hundreds of janitors employed throughout Baltimore fought for higher wages and better benefits. The Service Employees International Union’s Justice for Janitors successfully acquired a “28 percent pay increase” and “up to two weeks vacation and employer-paid family

prescription drug coverage” (2007, 336-337). The issue Dreier and Atlas make abundantly clear is that while there was news media attention given to the local and national progress these grassroots organizations were making during the airing of *The Wire*, those real-life storylines remained absent from the show. Thus, without them, the show painted an image of the city of Baltimore and all cities like it in the United States as hopeless impoverished places where the people who live there are destined to be poor forever.

In contrast to Dreier and Atlas’s analysis of *The Wire*’s shortcomings, scholars Anmol Chaddah, William Julius Wilson, and Sudhir A. Venkatesh (2008) claims Dreier and Atlas do not give the show enough credit for its remarkable ability to touch on the realities within poor communities in the U.S. Chaddah, Julius and Venkatesh (2008, 83) state that, “*The Wire*—even with its too-modest viewership—has done more to enhance both the popular and the scholarly understanding of the challenges of urban life and the problems of urban inequality than any other program in the media or academic publication we can think of.” The three authors explain how it was not the show’s fault that there is a lack of media coverage of the various organizations that Dreier and Atlas discuss, but rather it is the fault of several media outlets’ inability to cover the activism and accomplishments made by these groups in Baltimore. Chaddah, Julius, and Venkatesh make the overarching point that the creators of *The Wire* sought out to uncover the truth about impoverished communities who are suffering in America, and they did it effectively by creating characters that had tangible personalities which were representative of real people in Baltimore and other cities like it.

Conclusion

The relationship between American popular culture and America’s systems of law is complex and has been in existence for many years. Scholars have sifted through and studied this

relationship closely. The importance of the impact popular culture has on the public's perception of the law, and therefore, the impact it has on our legal systems is undeniable with evidence provided by several studies. Research has concluded that the viewership of television and films related to our court system does play a role in how people view the legal system and what they expect from it. Teaching law and popular culture and teaching *The Wire* are both popular phenomena at higher education institutions across the United States. *The Wire* itself has become such a popular teaching source for professors because of its unique grasp on real-world issues.

Knowing and understanding why the media influences the public's perception of the law is crucial to obtaining a just society that can perform at its best. Many television series have proven to aid in the negative impact popular culture has on the public's perception of the legal system in America. HBO's *The Wire* stands out as one television series that did not aim to perpetuate the age-old narrative of the heroic police officers who get the perpetrators every time but rather sought to uncover the systematic issues that run rampant in the United States. In the next chapters of this thesis, I will delve deeper into the importance of *The Wire* and the benefits it can have on our society's perception of legal institutions and political issues.

Chapter Two: *The Wire* Season Four Analysis Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the methodology of my thesis. I will explain why I chose *The Wire* as my primary source to analyze. I will describe the way in which I went about analyzing the content of the show and how I chose the season and the amount of episodes I did. Later in this chapter, I will detail how I will assess my eventual findings. It is important to analyze *The Wire's* content to understand what the show is about and the way it addresses real-life institutions within the judicial system and sociopolitical issues American society deals with everyday.

Description of The Wire

The show *The Wire* depicts the city of Baltimore and its struggle with crime. The show reveals the workings of the Baltimore Police Department, the criminals they seek to catch, and their networks, as well as the political figures and policies that shape the city. There are five seasons of the show. Season one focuses on the drug trade, season two on the loss of seaport labor jobs, season three on local government, season four on the school systems, and finally, season five on media in Baltimore. Each season ranges from ten to thirteen episodes. Season four, which I focused on, has a total of thirteen episodes, each roughly an hour long. The show follows several characters. There are police officers, politicians, government employees, drug dealers, community members, and students who attend the local Baltimore schools. Throughout the five seasons, the show takes audience members on a journey through the poorest communities within the city of Baltimore, unveiling the corruption, crime, and brutality that occurs within them. *The Wire* depicts police officers, criminals, and politicians as both good and bad. No one group is glorified or made out to be heroes per se. Each season focuses on a

different topic. In season four specifically, the show depicts the trials and tribulations of the Baltimore school system. Additionally, the season shows how political figures and their decisions, in tandem with the police department, play a role in shaping the school system. In season four, the show follows a group of boys who become some of the season's main characters. This group of boys, Duquan, Michael, Randy, and Namond, are followed throughout the thirteen episodes to show their respective journeys through the system. We see how the boys go through school, what their home lives are like, and what activity they get into when school is not in session. We see how they interact with police and teachers. Each boy leads a different life, yet they all remain in similar situations.

On top of what we see in the schools, the show continues to follow characters from previous seasons as well. We follow the drug lords and head criminals of the city: Marlo, Proposition Joe, and Omar. In this season, Proposition Joe creates a Co-Op of drug leaders so that they can all do business together more efficiently without quarrels between their groups. Omar is not a drug dealer but rather someone who likes to keep drug lords in check and seeks revenge for anything wrong done to him or his people. He does not strike civilians, which is rare among this crowd of people. He and Marlo are at odds, and Proposition Joe tries to create more problems for them both without them knowing. All the while, we see police officers continue their work searching for homicide cases, dealing out arrests, and investigating cases. Through the police officers, we get a firsthand look into the inner workings of the Baltimore Police Department and the politics that come into play throughout it. We see how politicians are pulling the puppet strings of the heads of each department and how this affects the way the officers police the inner-city neighborhoods. When a new mayor is elected, Thomas Carcetti, it appears that a new day has come for Baltimore, one where statistics and quotas do not rule the way

officers police the city. However, politics is a game just like the one the drug lords play, it remains even when the players change. Season four uncovers the dilemmas the school systems face, the politicians who try to fix them or do not, and the cycle of crime in the impoverished neighborhoods of Baltimore.

I chose to analyze *The Wire* for this thesis because I knew it would result in a great deal of information that I could work with related to topics I wanted to address. *The Wire* is now very well known among academics and regular television series bingers. The show is known for being remarkably accurate and its depiction of the Baltimore Police Department, the Baltimore school system, and law enforcement and politicians in general. The show has often been compared to a great literature series rather than a fictional television show. I decided to analyze *The Wire* over some other shows that have related topics, such as *Law and Order: SVU* and *CSI*, because 1. They were much too narrowly focused, and 2. They are dramas, but they do not necessarily aim to educate audience members about issues American cities are still facing today. David Simon, one of the creators of *The Wire*, has explained numerous times that he wanted to bring viewers a show that was brutally honest. David Simon said in an interview from April 2020 with *Vanity Fair* that he and his team of writers “basically threw out [the dominant model] and said, “Nah, let’s just write a book. Let’s write the best possible story we can, and let’s treat these things as chapters” (Ryan, 2020). The dominant model he is referring to is the traditional way in which fictional television shows are written and made. Later in the same interview, Simon speaks to the point of why *The Wire* was made. David Simon states:

I’m not suggesting *The Wire* is in any way paramount among those, but we did kick in our share of early and dramatic arguments against the drug prohibition, and what it’s done to inner-city neighborhoods and to racial inequality—the things that the drug war was destroying and continues to destroy. Did we make a dent in unrelenting and brutalizing capitalism? No. We knew why we were writing certain seasons, and we knew why

they were necessary. The vast majority of viewers will argue that season two was much less fun because it was much less “cops and robbers.” It was more about the death of work, and what was happening with automation and the decline of the working class, and the loss of union collective bargaining power. But there are a lot of people who experience it as “I want to see some more bang-bang. Give me more, Omar. Give me some more ‘Barksdale versus the world.’” I get that. We were trading in that. We knew we had to make the story entertaining. But our reasons for doing it were so that we could sustain a sociopolitical argument. That was why we got up in the morning. (Ryan, 2020)

The show held so much potential in displaying an accurate depiction of crime, corruption within police work and political offices, and the way the Baltimore systems have failed children in schools. I wanted to look at season four specifically because of its focus on the school system.

The Baltimore school system plays such an important role throughout season four of *The Wire* which is what led me to ultimately analyze that season alone of all five the series had to offer. I wanted to see how the show addressed common sociological issues in American society regarding school systems. Predominantly, the sociological theory of the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Scott, 2017). The discussion of schools and how they play an integral role in shaping communities across the country intrigued me. I wanted to analyze how *The Wire* approached the issues of underfunded schools, corrupt administrations, good-hearted teachers who truly do want to help students, police in schools, and more. The school-to-prison pipeline is an increasingly alarming issue in the United States and has been uncovered by the work of sociological researchers over the past several decades. DeWitt Scott outlined in his paper on the issue that prior research had established a clear cause-and-effect relationship between school policies and the number of students who become eventual inmates in prisons. Scott stated “It became clear that a collection of policies instituted in the public education sphere— particularly urban public schools—was having a direct impact on not only the number but the racial and class backgrounds of future prisoners as well” (2017, 42). Scholars have presented the direct link

between over policing in schools in low-income areas with the increase in incarceration among adolescents within those communities (Schept, Wall, Brisman 2014). The issue of the school-to-prison pipeline was something I felt was crucial to analyze in my analysis of *The Wire*. However, I did not think it should be the main focus of my analysis, even within the school category I was interested in examining. The school-to-prison pipeline is a very complex issue that is affected by multiple factors within a community. Therefore, all of the topics I wanted to focus on would eventually lead me to the analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline. In the next sections of this chapter I will walk you through my analysis goals and the process I undertook to examine the topics I ultimately chose to focus on.

Show Analysis Goals

My goal was to analyze the content of season four. I wanted to watch each episode and take notes on the way they portray four specific topics: Schools, Drug trade/Criminal activity, Law Enforcement, and Politics. I also wanted to address the topics and themes that overlapped in these four categories. Those topics and themes included poverty and the school-to-prison pipeline.

I chose these specific topics because they were very prevalent among the previous seasons I had watched and through the literature I had read about the show prior to beginning my analysis. The four main topics I mentioned above: Schools, Drug trade/Criminal activity, Law enforcement, and politics, are all very apparent through the show's five seasons, but they all have a dominant role in season four specifically. I wanted to analyze the content of the show to see how the creators portrayed these various topics and institutions. My goal was to see if they were attempting to evoke a certain type of reaction from me as a viewer, negative or positive, in regards to the characters and their respective occupations. Did the show portray police officers in

a positive light? Did they portray officers and politicians as heroes who were there to protect and save the city from crime and poverty? Did I see negative scenes portraying police officers and politicians as corrupt and bad? Did I empathize with criminals? Did I feel sorry for them or feel like they were not in the wrong? How did the show portray the Baltimore school system? Did they portray school administrators as corrupt or professionals who worked toward the greater good for the students? Did the show address policing in schools in impoverished communities? These were among the many questions I asked myself when I sat down to analyze the show. Each question fed into my overarching goal to assess the quality of the show's portrayal of law enforcement, schools, politics, and the drug trade in Baltimore.

Expectations

My expectations varied throughout the thesis process. At the start, my only expectation was that I would learn that *The Wire* was an accurate representation of the city of Baltimore. I did not have very many expectations prior to my literature review. Post my literature review, I found myself expecting to learn much more about the character development and the way the show went about addressing certain issues it did regarding corruption, police brutality, the failing school system, etc.

In Chapter One I discussed the work published by professors at various higher education institutions who have taught *The Wire* as a source text in their courses. Law professors used the show to teach criminal procedure (Gallini, 2014), others used the show as a source to generally discuss the portrayal of education in the series (Trier, 2010). After reading through numerous academic papers written by scholars on their views of the show and its ability to be a useful tool in higher education classrooms, I felt that my approach regarding expectations had to be widened. I began detailing the topics I sought to learn more about throughout the season. By

creating a more detailed list of items I would look for throughout season four, I was able to grow my expectations astronomically. I expected that my own analysis of the show would lead me in a different direction than the scholars I have cited above because of the type of information I was seeking. The scholars I discussed in this chapter and in Chapter One provided me with enough evidence that *The Wire* was worthy of analyzing and helped shape some of my expectations for what I was going to find.

Therefore, overall, while I did have some expectations reserved for my analysis prior to conducting my research, my analysis was centered around a set of questions rather than a set of expectations. My research was motivated by wondering how the show portrayed the public school systems, the drug trade/criminal activity, law enforcement, and politics in Baltimore. I had some expectations prior to my analysis process of season four on the way the show portrayed criminal activity and law enforcement because I was already familiar with season one and two of *The Wire*, but I had very little expectations for the way the show perceived schools and politics.

After reading the articles I mentioned in chapter one and again above, detailing how professors at universities across the country have utilized *The Wire* as a text in their classes to teach about law, poverty, crime, and more, I expected to find that I would feel impassioned by the content of the show. I expected to find myself moved by the stories told and the characters involved throughout the season.

Methodology

To analyze the content of *The Wire*, I chose to watch season four in its entirety. I chose season four because I thought that its focus on schools would make for the most compelling analysis. It was also deep enough into the series for the creators to have worked on any issues they had in the first few seasons with poor choices of actors or plot lines that did not work out

well. From the synopsis I had researched about the season, I felt that it included nearly every major topic the series addressed in each of its seasons, making it the best choice if I was going to only watch one season. I decided to watch all thirteen episodes of season four so that I had a complete look at a whole season. My previous viewing of seasons one, two, and part of season three apart from my thesis drastically helped me when I was analyzing season four, however, I did not include those seasons in my analysis. Knowing who the characters were who had been on previous seasons and the stories they had helped me in my analytical process because had I not known them or their backgrounds, I believe the process would be much slower going, and it would have hurt my ability to pick up on small details. I watched each episode, each being nearly an hour-long at fifty-eight minutes, with the final episode being the longest at an hour and eighteen minutes.

I created an analysis guide to help navigate me through the process of analyzing the show. On this sheet, I had various topics outlined and questions to answer under them. I set up this code sheet with items I expected to find throughout the season. I then broke those topics down into subcategories with various additional questions and terms underneath each. The four major topics I focused from season four were Schools, Drug Trade/Criminal Activity, Law Enforcement, and Politics. I came to the conclusion that these four topics would best suit my analysis process. They were all topics I wanted to analyze how the show portrayed them. They were also all very evidently part of season four. The four topics were general enough that I could analyze subtopics within them all and view the way in which they connected to each other. At the bottom of my guide you will notice I have a Miscellaneous section. This section was meant to serve as a net for any topics or issues that arose during my analysis process that I wanted to

include but could not sort appropriately in a single topic. I mainly used the Miscellaneous section for my analysis of character development.

Below is my complete analysis guide:

| <i>Topic</i> | <i>Focus Questions</i> |
|----------------|---|
| Schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How does the show portray the education system in Baltimore? ● What are its issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do the classrooms look like? ○ What do the hallways look like? ○ What do the general facilities look like? ● Is there a lack of funding? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Are there resources in the schools? ● Is the school understaffed or adequately staffed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do the teachers seem stressed out or even-tempered? ● How is the school talked about by the characters in the show? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How do the teachers speak about the schools? ○ How do the administrators speak about the schools? ○ How do political figures discuss schools? ● Does the show discuss student’s home lives? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How so? ● Is there discussion, directly or indirectly, about the school-to-prison pipeline? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How is it discussed? ○ What is acknowledged about the concept of school-to-prison pipeline |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Drug Trade/Criminal Activity</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How are criminals in the show perceived? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do you, as a viewer, care about their well-being? ○ Does the show push you to empathize with the criminals? ● How is criminal activity portrayed in the show? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is the crime orderly or disorderly? ○ Are the networks of criminals business-like, or do they appear to work haphazardly? ● What is the type of retaliation people face when they go to the police with information on a gang or a crime they witnessed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is witness and police informant harassment present often throughout the season? ○ What is the reputation of police informants within the inner-city communities? ● How are drug addicts perceived in the season? |
| <p>Law Enforcement</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are police officers perceived as heroes, or do they present the characters as having flaws? ● Does the show portray police officers as mal-intentioned? ● Does the show portray police officers as violent against inner-city communities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What events involving police brutality occur in the season? ● Does the show push me to empathize with the police officers? ● Does the show push me to ultimately trust the police officers? |
| <p>Politics</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What role does politics play in the various other topics discussed in the show-- schools, law enforcement, criminal activity, etc.? ● How are politicians perceived? |

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Are they shown as corrupt or well-intentioned beings? ○ Do political figures do the right thing by the communities they serve most of the time? ● How are campaigns run? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is their foul-play involved in the campaign shown in season four? ● What is the relationship between police and politicians? |
| Miscellaneous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● General assessment of the character’s development throughout the season <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do the characters change throughout the season for the better or for worse? |

I watched each episode and created a specific document that correlated to the episode. I titled the document “Season 4 Episode #- Title” and then listed the topics I was focusing on: Schools, Drug trade/Criminal activity, Law enforcement, and Politics. Sometimes when necessary, I added an additional section titled “General.” For each episode, I collected about three to four pages worth of notes. In the next chapter, I will be presenting my findings from my analysis of season four of *The Wire* which will then lead into a discussion on the accuracies of the season as a whole.

Chapter Three: *Analysis and Findings of The Wire's Season Four*

Introduction

In Chapter Three, I will present my findings from my analysis of *The Wire*. I will explain how the show portrayed four different categories: schools, criminal activity, law enforcement, and politics. Throughout this chapter I will introduce the characters in the show, explain how they contributed to the overarching themes in *The Wire* and how the show developed the characters' own stories through season four.

Throughout this chapter, readers will gain a better understanding of the ways in which different institutions were portrayed in the show. My findings presented below showcase that the schools systems in *The Wire* were portrayed as underfunded and understaffed. The drug trade and criminal activity in the city was portrayed as a carefully thought out legitimate means of business for characters in the show. Law enforcement was portrayed as a community of mostly negligent and even malicious officers with the exception of some well-intentioned police officers. Finally, politics and politicians were presented as being corrupt and self-centered.

Schools

While *The Wire* mainly shows one public middle school in Baltimore, I was able to gather a general consensus through the characters' conversations and the overall plot line that the one school they do focus on is a general depiction of the entire public school system in Baltimore. The show portrays the Baltimore inner-city public schools as run-down, underfunded, understaffed, and overall, not a place where students come to become educated. The show focuses primarily on Tilghman Middle School. There are small scenes that discuss the high school that the middle school feeds into, but I did not get a personal view of the high school itself.

Underfunded- The Wire's Portrayal of School Funding

The signs of underfunding in the Baltimore schools are both subtle and very clear. Throughout the season, I saw how politics played a major role in shaping the budget for the school system in the city of Baltimore. The mayor of Baltimore in season four, Thomas Carcetti, gets elected and finds out there is a \$54 million deficit for the schools. This deficit is largely due to the negligence of previous politicians who were responsible for creating a budget and paying off the school's debt. Carcetti is forced to make a difficult decision; go to the Republican governor of Maryland and beg for a bailout of this incredibly large deficit (Carcetti is a Democrat) or cut programs and more teachers off the payroll to mitigate future costs. I saw how the decision Carcetti ultimately had to make came down to whether or not he would place the students in the school system over his political career. The way the show presented the dilemma was as follows; asking a Republican governor for help could hurt him in his future run for political offices, but not asking for the help left him with very little financial support to help the students in the schools. Cutting funding for the new year would result in more understaffing, larger class sizes for the already struggling students, and fewer resources overall. Therefore, Carcetti not going to the governor would hurt the children significantly. He ends up asking the governor for help, but the governor refuses in an act of selfishness politically. The scenes I saw in which Carcetti had to make his decision were often filled by political advisors who told him to not prioritize the kids and instead think of his own career. His chief of staff, in particular, was adamant about Carcetti not going to the governor for help (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 12). In episode 12, his Chief of Staff can be heard offering a solution to the deficit, he states, "Scale back our budget, No pay hikes, hiring freezes, reduced services. Tell everyone-- schools, police, fire, public works-- they have to hold the line for a year or two" (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode

12). The instance listed above is an example of the show's direct portrayal of the underfunding of the school system.

The more subtle ways in which *The Wire* portrays an underfunded and run-down school system in Baltimore come to light through smaller moments. In the first episode, former Baltimore police officer, Mr. Pryzbylewski is seen cleaning his own classroom before the school year starts. While it might be common for a teacher to put up decorations and set up his own desk, I felt like the show was showing me as a viewer that the teacher had to scrape off gum from under desks because the janitors either did not do it or they were too busy with bigger projects. The desks themselves appear to be old and abused. The paint on their surfaces is chipping off, words are either scribbled or carved into them, and nearly every desk is covered with old pieces of gum underneath (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 1). This demonstrated to me how the students treated the school's property based on their view of the school's worth. Additionally, later in the season, when a large case the police department is investigating reveals several dead bodies in abandoned buildings throughout the city, the head of the department chooses a specific location to house the bodies for forensic research. In episode 13, Detective Lester Freamon asks the head of the department, Cedric Daniels, why he chose the specific location to house the dead bodies, Lester replies, "Lemell? They closed it a few years back and I knew it was near a lot of our crime scenes. I went to school here back in the day. Got a decent education now that I think on it." This short conversation showcases how in Cedric's own lifetime, he has seen his own middle school be closed.

Throughout the entire season, I never saw or heard any mention of extracurricular activities. The students never appeared to play on sports teams or have programs after school for the theater and the arts. This appeared to be the show's way of saying that there is no funding for

these programs, and therefore there is no need to mention their absence because their absence speaks for itself.

The Portrayal of Good Faculty Versus Bad Faculty

The overarching message *The Wire* presented about the staff at Tilghman Middle School was that they were often stressed out with their large class sizes and the abundance of restless students who often acted out. Just as I will later discuss under each of the following sections on the drug trade, law enforcement, and politics, there are good and bad characters in the schools in *The Wire*. The good teachers are ones I classified as willing to take extra time with students, did not lose patience with them when the students did not understand basic concepts and wanted to genuinely teach the students lessons in ways that adapted to their abilities and not simply the statewide curriculum. The bad teachers were those who often complained about the students' restlessness, misunderstood the context of the student's inappropriate behavior, and punished students based on their assumptions of them or punished them too harshly.

The main character of the school sections of the season is named Roland "Pryzbylewski" Pryzbylewski. Those who are familiar with the prior seasons of *The Wire* might recognize the name because Pryzbylewski was a former Baltimore police officer. After several traumatic mistakes throughout his time as a police officer, he gave up his career in law enforcement and chose to become a teacher. The show portrays Pryzbylewski as a dynamic teacher because of his background in law enforcement. His eagerness to make a difference in his classroom with his students makes up for his lack of teaching experience. There are many scenes at the beginning of season four where other teachers who are more experienced help him calm his class down after a student has an outbreak or when they are not listening to him. These other veteran teachers often give him pieces of advice that shed light on how *The Wire* wanted to portray teachers and the

school system in general. One common piece of advice Pryzbylewski receives from the other faculty throughout the season is different ways to keep his class “drowsy” (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 1). The first mention of this advice can be seen in episode 1, where one of the other teachers tells him to keep his shades pulled down throughout the day because it will make the class more tired, and tired is a good thing because they are less alert. Pryzbylewski is confused and shocked by this statement because he does not understand why you would want non-alert tired students.

As the show progresses and his classroom of students is introduced, I, along with Pryzbylewski, learn why he would want them to be slightly groggy. His class, at first, was often loud and obnoxious. They rarely listened to him and often spoke over one another. In the first few days of school, two fights break out between the same two female students. The last fight reveals the severity of fights that can occur in the Baltimore middle school depicted in season 4. The scene in question depicts one girl provoking the other by shining the sunlight from the window in her compact mirror and directing it in the other girl’s eyes. The girl who was provoked stood up and started shouting at the other student and eventually cut her cheek with what appears to be a sharp razor blade. The girl bleeds profusely, and the whole class gathers around her. Some of the other students are laughing and cheering, while others look shocked. No one other than Pryzbylewski looks scared, which made me feel as though the show was trying to point out that this could be a regular occurrence for the students in their school (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 3). The following day, Pryzbylewski is still reeling from the events that occurred and cannot understand why the other students are not more visibly uncomfortable with what happened in his class. This, too, signifies that fights breaking out between students is not a rare

occurrence in Tilghman Middle School. Overall, I saw how Pryzbylewski tried to connect with his students on a deeper level more than other teachers were trying to.

While his teaching career started off poorly at first, Pryzbylewski soon understood how he had to speak to the students in order to command respect and what lessons would excite them enough to pay attention in class. Pryzbylewski was an active opponent against the statewide exams that his students would soon have to take in the spring. The exams become a key plotline within the sections of the season about the school system. The standardized tests were often critiqued by administrators and teachers alike because of the fact that the students in Tilghman Middle School were already struggling with their regular grade curriculum. It was mentioned several times that students were several years behind their appropriate grade-level skills in math and literacy. Pryzbylewski, being new to the school system, was shocked that the school was requiring all teachers to spend a large portion of their class time teaching directly to the test itself by issuing practice problems rather than staying on course with their subject matter. This was another instance where I felt that the show was demonstrating that Pryzbylewski was a good teacher because he criticized the standardized tests. In one scene in particular in episode 9, Pryzbylewski is speaking with his colleague:

Pryzbylewski: If we are teaching them the test questions, then what is it assessing?

Other teacher: Nothing. It is assessing us. If test scores go up, they can say the schools are improving.

Pryzbylewski: Juking the stats.

Other Teacher: Excuse me?

Pryzbylewski: Making robberies into larcenies. Making rapes disappear. You juke the stats, and majors become colonels. I've been here before.

Other Teacher: Wherever you go, there you are.

Pryzbylewski's comparison to creating heavily influenced statistics was a topic that was also brought up in discussion with the politicians and the law enforcement in this season. His reference to "juking the stats" was about the way in which his commanders in his former career

as a police officer would require the same of him that his current bosses in the school administration required of him. He needed to teach the class the test problems so that they would test decently well and the school would look better. This is the same concept as officers making mass arrests to heighten their statistics and make it appear that their departments were doing well and making strides against crime rates in the city. The truth, however, was brought to light through Pryzbylewski's comment. He and the rest of the faculty knew they were not helping students by requiring them to learn test material. He knew it was hurting the students more because the testing material was not teaching them actual lessons in math, writing, and reading.

The head administrator at Tilghman Middle School, Marcia Donnelly, depicts a bad faculty member. She is not necessarily malicious or ill-intentioned, but she does not aim to make a difference with the students each year she teaches but rather get through the school year and make it to the next. Some of her direct moments of displaying negative behavior as a member of the faculty come through when she punishes various students throughout the season. In one scene, she accuses a student named Randy Wagstaff of "tagging the halls" with spray paint (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 4). Randy was caught selling candy and other snacks to students at various lunch periods he was not supposed to be at. By accusing him of a more serious offense, she is demonstrating her bias against the students at her school. It was a scene in which I felt that she was assuming he must have been the culprit of the spray paint because she did not expect anything more from him or the other students. I found out that she was wrong in her accusation because the boy never spray-painted the walls. In the same scene, the boy begins to tell her about the wrongdoings of other students in order to receive a lighter punishment from the principal. He tells her he knows about a murder that happened in the community, while this information is irrelevant to the issues occurring in the school, the administrator feels that she needs to notify the

police. It does not occur to her that the police might mistreat Randy for being a young black boy in the poor area of Baltimore. When the principal tells Pryzbylewski what she is going to do, he tells her to hold off on notifying the police so he can contact a former colleague of his whom he trusts. Their exchanges goes as follows (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 6):

Pryzbylewski: He's a good kid, he is, and once you make that call, his name is gonna be in the system

Donnelly: What can I do? He tells me he knows about a murder, I need to notify the police.

Pryzbylewski: Least let me call someone I trust.

I find it highly unlikely, based on how long the principal has seemingly worked in the school system, that she is unaware of how badly calling the police could turn out for Randy. However, she still originally thought it would be best to contact the police. This signifies to me that she views him as a criminal or a person who associates with criminals and does not worry about the consequences of her actions. It is only after Pryzbylewski explains what calling the police could do to Randy if handled by the wrong police officer that Donnelly lets him take over and handle the situation.

Throughout the season, I saw more teachers who served as supporting actors and actresses who also fed into the narrative *The Wire* presented on the Baltimore school system. The teachers were often complaining about the lack of funding or their riled-up students who acted out. They all played a role in defining the show's portrayal of a chaotic school system.

Corner Boys and Their Special Classroom Program

During season four, we also see a special classroom of students form as part of a study being conducted by a professor at the University of Maryland. The professor wanted to take what is known as the "corner boys," who are known for being the most disruptive individuals in the classroom and creating a separate class for them in which they get the necessary attention they need from teachers and social workers. The professor solicits the help of a former police

commanding officer named Howard Colvin. Colvin soon becomes a prominent figure in the school portion of the season. He plays an influential role in the special classroom for the students who need extra attention. His knowledge of Baltimore, having grown up and lived there his entire life and then working as a police officer, shaped his ability to connect with the students and keep even the toughest among them in check. His character develops as the season progresses, and it is clear that the show is using him as a figure of authority within the school system, which is rare yet incredibly powerful when present. Colvin is someone who puts the children before anything else. When he shows up to work in the special classroom, he is there trying to figure out how to reach them on the students' own terms, not based on how the academic world might try to study them or how the state-mandated curriculum wants to teach them. He often is heard making powerful statements that I could see truly being absorbed by the students. In episode 8, Howard Colvin says that the kids are in school, but they're not getting an education, they're just being set up for the streets.

Colvin: You know this right here, the whole damn school...the way they carry themselves. It's training for the street—the buildings, the system, we the cops.

Student: Yeah, you are for sure.

Colvin: I mean, y'all come in here every day and practice getting over. Try running all different kinds of games. You know it's practice for the corner, right? Ain't no real cops, ain't no real danger, but y'all getting something out of this.

His comment in the scene above demonstrates his ability to understand the students' perspective and see where they are coming from when they act out. Colvin's ability to do so is not shared by many other teachers who work full time at the school, unlike him.

The special classroom, to me, was *The Wire's* way of saying that if the Baltimore middle school could give these disadvantaged youth a smaller class with more dedicated teachers and social workers on deck when breakdowns occur, then they might actually get somewhere and not simply be a direct feeding tube to the crime that occurs on the streets in their communities.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

While the term school to prison pipeline is never directly mentioned by any of the characters on the show, the basic premise of the issue is discussed numerous times. When the topic of the school-to-prison pipeline is addressed, it is often referred to as the cycle the member of the Baltimore inner-city community goes through.

Throughout the scenes that take place in the special classroom designed to help and study the worst students at the middle school, I saw how the show portrayed the school-to-prison pipeline. The students in the special class are deemed by the head of the school as the most at-risk of getting suspended and dropping out of school. These students are habitual offenders who are often punished by the administrators. Howard Colvin's work with these students demonstrates the importance of getting ahead of the issue with the kids before they go to the streets to become drug dealers and criminals. Throughout the season, the characters make reference to this very cycle—the cycle of children going through the school system and eventually becoming drug dealers or drug addicts.

Michael Lee and Duquan Weems are two of the main characters in the season. They are both middle school-aged and demonstrate the experience of children who come from homes with addicted parents who cannot provide for them. Throughout the season, we see their character develop from students who genuinely try in school into drug dealers and criminals by the end of the season. *The Wire* portrays their characters as victims of their environment. The plotline makes it clear that the two students were destined for the streets by predetermined circumstances beyond their control.

Namond Brice is one of the students who was seen as a delinquent at the beginning of the season and is put into the special class program. Because of the fact that his needs were

recognized, he ends up with a different fate than his friends Michael and Duquan had. Colvin takes a special interest in Namond in the special program for bad students. Namond's father, Roland "Wee-Bey" Brice, was a well-known drug dealer who went to prison for a murder in season one of *The Wire*. Namond's mother pushes him to start selling drugs to make ends meet at home with his father away. It becomes clear that Namond is not cut out for the streets. Namond himself mentions this clearly in episode 12. He tells a male adult mentor in his community that he cannot sell drugs because he does not want to be his father. This breakdown of Namond's leads to Colvin asking Namond's father for permission to have Namond come live with him and his wife. *The Wire's* portrayal of Colvin's relationship with Namond demonstrates that it takes a certain amount of attention and support for a child in the inner city of Baltimore to be saved from their fate of going to prison or, worse, dying because of criminal activity.

Overall, the show depicts the school system as chaotic and rarely a good place to be as a student. There are very few adults who aim to make a difference with the students. Most of the faculty are there to get through the day without a large outburst from the students. In the next section, I will explain how the show portrays the drug trade and the crime that occurs in the Baltimore community as partially a result of the failing school system.

Drug Trade/Criminal Activity

The Wire's portrayal of the drug trade in Baltimore shows different networks of drug dealers and criminals and how they work with or fight each other. The major heads of each group that are shown in season four are Marlo Stanfield, Proposition Joe Stewart, and Omar Little. Marlo's main assistants in his criminal activity are named Chris Partlow and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson. Proposition Joe has men who help him, but they do not play a major role in the season.

Omar works mostly on his own and does not take part in drug trades but does commit other crimes.

Throughout season four, the show presents how the drug trade and criminal activity in Baltimore are complex and multi-layered. There are leaders, and there are their employees. The show presents the drug trade as a legitimate business that follows strict guidelines. However, as the season progresses, the show portrays Marlo Stanfield as a drug trade tycoon who is newer to the business and does not follow the historical code groups have followed for decades in Baltimore. Marlo's people kill people for no apparent reason at times. An important storyline throughout season four is Chris and Snoop following Marlo's orders and killing people who Marlo has deemed as his enemies. Chris and Snoop can be seen killing these people in abandoned homes throughout the city and boarding them up, so no one suspects anything has occurred inside. Through these scenes, I saw how the drug trade was presented as violent and dangerous.

Proposition Joe establishes what he calls a "Co-Op" in season four (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 1). This co-op includes the heads of several drug-dealing groups throughout the city. Their common enemies are Omar, who has had issues with drug dealers in the city for several years, and drug dealers from New York who try to take their clients by coming to Maryland and selling drugs. *The Wire* portrays the co-op similarly to how legitimate companies would work together for a common goal of selling a product and achieving a high revenue. However, I was often reminded that no matter how professional the co-op might have seemed, they were not a legitimate business but rather a network of criminals committing serious offenses. The co-op would meet in nice hotels in their ballrooms that one might go to for a work conference. They would conduct business sitting behind tables in a circle in a professional manner.

Additionally, the show presents the issue of older drug dealers recruiting young members of the community to join their criminal activity. I saw this mainly with the character Michael Lee. He was recruited by Marlo's group to join forces with them. Michael was only in eighth grade during season four, yet he already began murdering people for Marlo and selling drugs. In episode 12, Michael is with Chris and Snoop and shoots another character in the dug community in the head, and kills him. This character, Bodie, was seen with police officers, so Marlo suspected him of being a police informant, even though Bodie was not giving the officer information. Michael is then seen in episode 13 running the corner that Bodie used to be in charge of and selling drugs. Michael's story is a portrayal of a child who goes through the school system and eventually ends up in the world of crime. As I stated previously in the section on Schools, Michael's mother is a drug addict. He realizes he can lead a better life and provide for his little brother if he joins Marlo's group and sells drugs for him. Marlo supports Michael by putting him in a nicer home than his mom lived in and giving him money in exchange for his work dealing drugs and murdering people Marlo wants dead.

Another component to the show's portrayal of the drug trade briefly depicts the lives of drug addicts. I saw how drugs ran rampant throughout the inner city and left many of the characters' families and friends addicted and helpless. Bubbles, one character who in previous seasons was an active police informant, has attempted to stop using heroin several times but continues to relapse. In season four, I saw him take in a young man off the street and act as a father figure for him. He tried to get the boy to start school again, but he was already addicted to drugs and kept skipping classes. Bubbles continue to be there for the boy because he understands the struggle with addiction even at the boy's young age. I also saw how various students shown in the season dealt with their own parents being addicted to heroin. These students basically had

to raise themselves and take care of their own needs because their parents' addiction to drugs caused them to neglect their children. In one heartbreaking scene in episode 8, Michael Lee is searching for his family's groceries in the kitchen. He cannot find anything he just purchased with their family's food stamps. He soon realizes his mother has sold their groceries for drugs, something she has done before. Similar to Lee's mother, Duquan Weems' family takes clothing donations given to him by the school and sells them for drugs.

Omar Little is a rare type of criminal. He is seen committing crimes only against very violent criminal characters. In episode 3, Omar goes into a bodega shop to warn the owner to stop dealing drugs out of his store. The owner of the shop is a bad person who uses young girls to make drops for the packages of drugs he receives. Omar shoots through the bullet-proof glass to scare the owner. Then he asks for a pack of cigarettes, in this instance, he could have easily taken them and left but instead, Omar pays for them as if nothing happened. This type of incidence happens again later in the season. In this regard, Omar has a code of conduct for himself that he lives by. He does not steal, he only does the business he set out to do and leaves. This is very unlike other leaders in criminal activity that occurs in the season. To a certain extent, this made Omar a character I empathize with throughout the season. He was someone I did not see as a criminal but rather a hero of the community because he only went after violent leaders, never civilians. In fact, his anti-civilian harming policy is something well known in the community. In episode 8, Detective William Bunk disproves that Omar killed a delivery woman in a convenience store because he knows Omar would never kill an innocent civilian. Through more detailed detective work, he eventually finds real evidence that it could not have been him, but his hunch that it was not Omar stems from his knowledge of his code of ethics.

The Wire's portrayal of the drug trade in Baltimore as a whole and the networks of criminals who ran the streets of the city presented them as a community of businesses that worked thoughtfully. The well-oiled machine of drug networks in season four was demonstrated as having rules which many abided by, but not all did as I stated previously regarding Marlo Stanfield's team of dealers. The show's portrayal made the drug trade seem like a legitimate business that was far from disorderly. Most of the players within the drug trade and criminal network were replaceable, but the leaders were perceived as being nearly irreplaceable. In the next section, I will present my analysis of the law enforcement shown throughout season four and how their stories intertwine with both the schools and the drug trade.

Law Enforcement

Oftentimes we hear about law enforcement having a few *bad apples*, but that the greater portion of the police force is considered *good apples*. *The Wire* takes a more nuanced approach to this debate. The overall portrayal of law enforcement in season four of *The Wire* depicts the Baltimore Police Department as being made up of a few *good apples*, while the rest are *bad apples*.

It is important to make the distinction between what behavior *The Wire* labels as being "good police" versus "bad police" (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 1). Throughout season four, I saw the way the law enforcement characters worked on the job as police officers and noticed that being a good police officer did not always mean that the officer did exactly what was asked of them by higher commanders in the department. In fact, it was typical for the actions of officers who did not listen to their boss's instructions to be more ethical. Good police, in the way the show portrayed it meant being hardworking and having good intentions as an officer. Good police were officers who actually liked their jobs and wanted to do right by the communities they

worked in. They were the type of characters that aimed to put bad criminals away, not for the sake of statistics or quotas that the department was required to reach, but rather because the city of Baltimore would be better off with those criminals off the streets. These characters took their time with investigations, they did not rush them, and they did not plant evidence. Instead, these characters used the evidence they were provided with at crime scenes and carefully thought about how they could fit together in the crime investigation puzzle.

Good Police Officers

The characters who I viewed as being portrayed as “good police” were James “Jimmy” McNulty, Shakima “Kima” Greggs, Lester Freamon, and Cedric Daniels. Although these four characters were not the only officers who did the right thing when it came to investigations throughout season four, they were the most prominent police officers the show presented as rarely doing anything unethically, if at all.

Jimmy McNulty depicts a police officer who does right by the community he serves in. He, unlike his colleagues, does not want to make petty arrests for small crimes such as littering, open containers, and parking violations. He wants to see the real culprits of the major crimes occurring in the city be put away. His character showed me what happens when officers with good intentions patrol the streets in the show. In episode 1, McNulty pulls his patrol car up to a corner where drug dealers are working and tells them that they have an hour to clear out of the area. He does not arrest them despite the fact that he knows they are dealing drugs. This is because McNulty understands the game these dealers play. He knows that if he arrests one or two of them right then and there on the corner, he accomplishes very little because those men will be easily replaced by new dealers. *The Wire* shows that McNulty often demonstrates a sense of respect for the communities he polices. He does not want to put random people in prison, he

only wants to see the actual violent leaders put away. In another scene in episode 11, McNulty is out grabbing lunch from a local deli and spots a local drug dealer he has known from the system for several years. He sits down with him, and they talk like they are old friends. It is safe to say that *The Wire* presents the drug dealing community as enemies of the police department.

Therefore, McNulty sitting with one of the members of that community is a very rare occurrence for a police officer, yet McNulty makes it seem normal and seamless because he is not like most of the other officers. He views the people of the community as more than just criminals, and that is important in understanding who he is as a character and police officer.

Kima Greggs worked for the Major Crimes Unit until it was taken over by a new department head who wanted to change the entire unit and make them focus on less important investigations. She left and went to the homicide department. She was new to the department but wanted to make a difference right away. There was one case in particular that the department detectives were working on regarding a witness who was murdered. None of the other detectives in the department are trying too hard on investigating the case. Kima goes to the crime scene well after the crime has happened to look for anything that might be of help to their investigation. Her dedication to her career as law enforcement and specifically as an investigator comes out very prominently through this scene. In episode 7, due to her extra time spent investigating the crime scene, she is able to uncover that the witness murder was a sheer accident and not a planned murder. Without her time spent investigating, the other main detectives on the case would have never solved it. Additionally, Kima demonstrates her humanity as an officer through her relationship with a former police informant named Bubbles. She has created a relationship with him over the past several years and looks out for him. Most officers in the department treat members of the inner city who they deem as criminals or addicts with very little

respect. Kima treats Bubbles as if he is a member of her family. In the final episode of the season, Kima visits Bubbles in a hospital where he has been taken after attempting suicide. In this scene, she looks sad and worried for him. Not many other officer characters in the show would have the same reaction over a drug addict's attempted suicide.

Similar to Kima Greggs, Lester Freamon also transferred from the Major Crimes Unit to the Homicide Unit. Throughout the season, Freamon presents himself as a police investigator who cares about conducting a thorough investigation that produces good results with a lot of evidence. He is also very intelligent. During the season, the Baltimore police department tries to figure out why men are going missing. Freamon ties the missing people to Marlo Stanfield's group of people and ultimately uncovers numerous dead bodies from the abandoned houses that Chris and Snoop had left in them. His boss tells him to stop breaking down doors on the abandoned houses because the more bodies he finds the more work the department has to do. Lester Freamon is angered by this because the case has the potential to bring down a major drug kingpin, Marlo Stanfield (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 12). In episode 13, Jay Landsman, the homicide department's head officer says "Is everyone on a crusade to make murders out of bullshit." Lester Freamon does not see his hard work investigating these several murders as "bullshit" and continues working on the investigation. Freamon's work throughout season four demonstrates his ability to be a good police officer.

Cedric Daniels depicts a rare type of commander in the Baltimore police department. He is someone who does not want to continue the long line of former commanders who did not do right by the city of Baltimore but rather did what the politicians wanted them to do for their own gain. Daniels sees an opportunity to turn a new page in the city of Baltimore for the police department when Thomas Carcetti is elected as mayor. The two men work together to launch a new image

for the city and its issue with crime. In episode 8, Daniels has a meeting set up with Carcetti to discuss what is not working currently in the Baltimore Police Department. Daniels is discussing what he should say with his girlfriend, who is also a local prosecutor. Daniels says, “How honest should I be? I mean, it’s one thing for me to talk tactical shit or enforcement strategies, but the shit that actually goes on, I start talking about that, I don't know if I can stop” (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 8). His remark about how honest he should be stems from his fear of political leaders in the past and their tendency to play politics over doing the right thing morally. I saw here how Daniels did want to explain what was really going on in the department to the new mayor, which provided me insight into how much he cares as an officer.

Bad Police Officers

Ervin Burrell, Edward Walker, William Rawls, Jay Landsman, and Anthony Colicchio are among the officers who all exhibited negative tendencies. Ervin Burrell was chief commissioner. He gave out orders that benefited him and his friends in political offices. He did not care how the community felt or if they were being treated fairly. Anthony Colicchio, was a low level officer who also liked to be extremely aggressive when given a chance. If an arrest or search was to be done, he did not care how he handled the person in question, in fact, in one scene in season four, he laughs about how great it felt to get back to his old ways of harassing the drug dealers in the community.

Edward Walker, a patrol officer, was by far the worst low-level officer on the show. The children in the community called him “evil” numerous times and ended up retaliating because of how terrible he treated them (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 10). In one scene with Walker, he breaks a child's fingers in response to finding the boy driving a car illegally and hitting other vehicles on the road. He also is seen harassing children and adults in the community unprovoked.

In episode 7, former police informant Bubbles is consistently being robbed by another drug addict in his area. Bubbles had been running a small business out of a shopping cart he had found selling clothing, snacks, and other convenience store items. When Bubbles asks a police officer for help, Edward Walker, the officer does not help him but rather berates him for not having a proper license to sell the items he is selling and then steals some of the products out of the cart. Bubbles replies to the officer by saying, “You gon rob me too, Baltimore’s finest” (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 7). I felt that this scene was a very clear depiction of how the show portrayed the bad officers in the department. Here Bubbles was asking for help, and all Walker did was steal more from him than the addict who had been robbing him did.

In addition to Edward Walker and Ervin Burrell, there were many occasions throughout the show where nameless officers served as further examples of negative behavior while policing. These were supporting characters who could be seen tossing items around, investigating houses, conducting searches and seizures without warrants, and harassing people on the streets just for fun (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 8, Episode 10). In episode 11, after local kids had thrown paint on Officer Walker as an act of retaliation against him, Walker went to work the following day and told his colleagues a very different story that he knew would give them the incentive to attack the members of the community. Walker tells three other officers that “Three of them with shotguns got me coming outside the club. I made ‘em for Bloods. The paint’s supposed to be some kind of declaration of war.” The officers' reply, “Sounds like we get to stomp some ass,” “the western district way” (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 11). This scene demonstrated that while Officer Walker might be one of the ring leaders for other bad officers, they were more than prepared to follow him into a self-imagined war against citizens in the community.

William Rawls and Jay Landsman are somewhat different from Burrell and Walker because they were not necessarily malicious in their intentions, but they did fulfill the malicious intentions of their bosses. Rawls and Burrell were presented as being close, and it was only until Rawls believed he had a shot at Burrell's position as commissioner did he undermine Burrell's corrupt ways. Other than the moments in which Rawls thought he could get a leg up by pretending to be a wholesome, good-hearted police officer, he did not have intentions to protect and serve the Baltimore community the way the officers in the show should have. Jay Landsman follows the orders that are given to him by Rawls and Ervin Burrell. He does not challenge authority and he does not try to better the system with the resources and power he does have. During the scenes in which Detective Freamon is trying to uncover the mysterious bodies that he and others have found in abandoned townhomes all across the city, Landsman orders him to stop his investigation because of the workload he is creating for the department.

Officers with Good Intentions, but Bad Habits

William "Bunk" Moreland, Ellis Carver, and Thomas "Herc" Hauk are among the officers I consider to be well-intentioned for the most part, but do not always place those intentions properly in the situations they are in. I put them in that order because I believe that is their rank on the scale of ethics of being a good cop. They each have varying levels of strengths and weaknesses, but overall they are not bad cops. Bunk often abuses his power while investigating a murder he is working on because he wants to solve it. He grew astronomically in season four. We see him at one point fight to get a suspect off the hook because he knows he did not commit the murder while his colleagues do not care who did it, they just want to put someone away for it. This was an example of Bunk working hard to do good police work. Ellis Carver is someone who also grew a lot during the course of season four. He was shown helping kids off the street in

an attempt to stop the vicious cycle within the community from kids to drug dealers to prison or worse-- death.

Thomas “Herc” Hauk is last on this list of three because he has more negative police officer tendencies than the other two. I attribute this to his displays of stupidity rather than I would to actual poor intentions. However, he can be seen roughing suspects up and yelling at witnesses during interrogation to admit statements that are not true. Two instances that left me feeling that he was not a great officer had to do with witness protection and police informant harassment.

During season four, Randy Wagstaff, a student I mentioned earlier in this chapter, is brought to the police department by his teacher Mr. Pryzbylewski after Randy has told his principal that he knows about a murder that occurred in Baltimore. Pryzbylewski trusts his former colleague Ellis Carver to take care of Randy and make sure that he does not get in trouble for providing any information he might have about the murder he knows about. Carver is busy with another case, so he gives Randy’s interview to Thomas “Herc” Hauk (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 7). Herc, in the following scenes related to this topic, demonstrates his lack of care for Randy and, it can be assumed, police informants in general. Herc ends up using a lead Randy gave him to interview another character named Little Kevin. Herc releases the information to Little Kevin that he was tipped by Randy Wagstaff (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 10). This results in Randy being placed in harm's way by many members of the community. Other students at school and on the street begin to call Randy a “snitch,” and in a certain scene, they assault him (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 10, Episode 11). The most severe consequence of Carver’s decision to give his responsibilities to Herc and Herc’s decision to tell a violent criminal about Randy occurs in the final episode when two boys throw a firebomb into Randy’s foster mom’s house

and the whole town house burns down, leaving his foster mom severely injured and Randy without a home (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 13).

In a scene regarding Bubbles, Herc again shows his lack of care dealing with informants. Bubbles was a loyal police informant in previous seasons. Therefore, it is understandable why he would want help in return from the police. Bubbles was being regularly robbed by another addict he would run into often. Bubbles asks Herc to help him catch the man. Herc said he would as long as Bubbles provoked the robber and then called Herc immediately. When the day comes in which Bubbles does what he is told, Herc does not answer his phone, and Bubbles is brutally attacked by the robber again. This same cycle occurs twice in the season; Bubbles calls for help, and Herc does not come (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 10). These two incidents demonstrate Herc's lack of care for police informants and the damage done when police officers do not protect them.

Witness and Police Informant Protection

Additionally, the lack of funding towards witness protection programs for the police department in Baltimore plays a large role in season four. At the beginning of the season, a witness for an important case is shot dead. There are rumors made by other characters in law enforcement and by political figures that the killing of this witness might have been to stop him from testifying in the case that was coming up. The murder launches a discussion between law enforcement and politicians about the need for funding for witness protection programs so that witnesses are not harmed, intimidated, or worse murdered because they are testifying in cases.

The Wire's portrayal of witness protection programs was that politicians and the police department heads had little motivation and desire to fund them and protect witnesses. The case of the murdered witness becomes a threat to the sitting mayor who is running for reelection. Mayor

Clarence Royce orders the commissioner to slow down the investigation to not bring any new information to the public's attention about the witness murder that could harm his ability to be reelected. The mayor was worried that any further investigation that led to findings that his administration had not funded witness protection better, which led to the murder of the witness, could look bad for him (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 3). Therefore, the show depicted witness protection programs as something that went overlooked and unfunded by politicians in power and law enforcement who had the ability to convince the mayor to do something about funding the programs. Lower level detectives were also seen in episode 11 telling Officer Cedric Daniels that they would like “better witness protection” (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 11).

Overall, the portrayal of witness protection programs appears to be something that the department does not have the funding for, and politicians do not seem to care to fund them. Still, detectives wish they would do a better job at funding these programs so that witnesses felt safer coming forward to discuss cases.

Politics

Similar to the role law enforcement plays throughout the story of season four, politics overlaps with many of the various worlds depicted in the show. The most prominent piece of politics portrayed in season four occurs at the beginning. There is a primary for the mayoral race going on in Baltimore. Thomas Carcetti is challenging the incumbent Clarence Royce. There is another candidate as well for the Democrats, but he is not very relevant. The issue of race is brought up several times. It is often said that the time for the white mayor in Baltimore is long gone, thus why Clarence Royce, a black man, was elected in the first place. Carcetti makes it a point that his skin color is one of his largest challenges. The discussion of gaining the black vote also comes up regularly. At one point during Carcetti’s campaign, his campaign manager,

Norman Wilson, turns to Carcetti and says, “Black folks have been voting white for years, it's yall who don't vote black.” In another scene, as Carcetti is preparing for his debate against the two other Democratic candidates, he tells his team, “Tonight I will kick his ass, but tomorrow morning I still wake up white in a city that ain't” (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 2). These two lines describe the portrayal of race as a key component that can make or break the election for the mayor in Baltimore.

Additionally, the show portrays politics as a dirty game in which fresh new players come in with honest intentions but grow to have ulterior motives and seek personal gain. Oftentimes I saw political figures and their employees describing the work they did in a negative way. During Carcetti's campaign, Royce's team launches a smear campaign but denies their involvement in it. Carcetti's wife responds by saying, “Oh my God, what a nasty business,” to which Carcetti responds, “Norman and Terri say not to worry. It's all in the game” Season 4, Episode 6). Norman and Terri are his advisors who are veterans in the political world, it is evident this is not the first time they have experienced this while it is Carcetti's first time. Later on, in the season, Norman is having drinks at a bar with Clarence Royce's former campaign manager. The two men are discussing politics, and Royce's former manager says, “They always disappoint, closer you get the more you see, all of them” in reference to politicians in general (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 13).

In one scene, one of Royce's security guards walks in on him receiving oral sex from his secretary. He is a married man. This creates a large dilemma for the security guard who consults another officer on the issue. The other officer tells him to keep his mouth shut, and Royce will take note of his loyalty and give him special treatment (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 2). The response from the older officer to the security guard suggests this happens regularly with men

like the mayor. Later in the season, one election night when Carcetti wins, he is seen in a hotel room with one of his campaign advisors kissing passionately. When he says he has to stop before it goes too far, the woman suggests Carcetti used to cheat on his wife all the time and asks what is new now. (*The Wire* Season 4, Episode 6). The demonstration of two politicians cheating on their wives shows me that *The Wire* is depicting politicians as adulterers, among other things.

The relationship I saw between law enforcement and political figures and their policies was not subtle. I do not simply mean because of the literal role politics plays in the chain of command to law enforcement through mandating certain laws and new regulations to abide by, but more so the behind-the-scenes corruption that was occurring. The show depicts the relationship between the police and politicians as corrupt almost entirely throughout the season. It is only when Carcetti gains his new title as mayor that I saw a change in that relationship. When Carcetti becomes mayor, he launches his plan of attack on reforming the city of Baltimore. His first step is to end the long history of corruption and bad policing within the Baltimore Police Department. Former politicians used the police as their pawns to benefit their political gains, but Carcetti goes straight to the source of where the problems are stemming from and changes leadership within the department from the top-down.

Mayor Clarence Royce, Maryland's Senator Clay Davis, and Commissioner Ervin Burrell are all working together in an effort to win more elections, earn more money, and more power. The three men are often seen conversing over topics that are unethical and do not have the best interest of the city in mind. However, the show portrays them in a way that does not make me feel like they are outliers in the political community. This is something that is often hinted at or spoke about directly.

Conclusion

The Wire focuses on four major areas during season four; schools, law enforcement, the drug trade and criminal activity, and politics. Each category overlaps with one another in some way. The interconnectedness of these four areas is heavily depicted through the character overlap throughout each topic and the plotlines they create. The overarching theme the show portrays is that in every realm of the city whether it be the school system, the police department, the drug trade, or the political arena, there are good players and there are bad players. This concept of good and bad sides to every character and issue blankets nearly every aspect of the season.

The school systems appear to be failing and are shown as underfunded and understaffed. The law enforcement department is shown as both bad and good with officers who are mal-intentioned and officers who truly want to see the city change for the better. The same rings true for the depiction of politics and political figures in season four. However, toward the end of the season, the overall consensus is that the corruption in Baltimore politics runs so deep that new players are unlikely to alter its trajectory. Finally, the drug trade and the networks of criminals within the city are portrayed as having complex personalities and legitimate business practices that pushed me as a viewer to look beyond their criminal activity and see them as human beings. Oftentimes, I was forced through the character development to see the criminals as victims of their environment. In Chapter Four I will present my findings from five interviews I conducted on the reality of witness protection and police informant harassment. These two topics were discussed in great length in season four and it is critical to assess the accuracy of how the show portrayed them versus what witness protection and police informant harassment is like in real life.

Chapter Four: *Witness Protection and Police Informant Harassment*

As discussed in Chapter Three, *The Wire* touches on several issues that face our country's legal system. For Chapter Four, I decided to focus on *The Wire's* portrayal of witness protection by law enforcement, and the types of harassment police informants face, and the level of accuracy in their portrayal of these issues. Assessing the accuracy of the entire series was not plausible. However, addressing the accuracy of these two topics was possible. In Chapter One, I discussed the works of several scholars on the power television and film have on public opinion. Various scholars made it clear that popular culture does play a role in the way people think about political and social issues. *The Wire's* potential high levels of accuracy portraying the criminal justice system is intrinsically important to my thesis and those who watch the show in general. Television shows hold power to influence how people who watch them think. Therefore, the way in which television shows portray real-life issues is incredibly important. If crime genre television shows only portray the police as heroes and criminals as antagonists, the world consuming them might begin to view real police officers and criminals this way. Thus, assessing whether or not *The Wire* portrayed specific topics pertaining to the criminal justice system accurately is crucial to determining its potential to change the way viewers think about the topics it addressed. Therefore, if the show is a mostly accurate portrayal of law enforcement, politics, school systems, and criminal activity, then it has the potential to alter the way many of us view American Society.

In season four, I watched how several characters were intimidated by their communities and at times even murdered for going to the police with information. Additionally, one major plotline in season four consisted of the issues surrounding a witness being murdered before testifying in an important case. *The Wire* provided a lot of information on the issues the

Baltimore system had pertaining to witness protection and police informant harassment. I felt that these two issues were concrete enough topics that I could interview criminal justice professionals about.

Methodology

To assess the accuracy of *The Wire's* portrayal of witness protection and police informant harassment, I interviewed five adults who work in the criminal justice system. Their experiences shaped my assessment of the accuracy of *The Wire's* portrayal of witness and police informant harassment and the forms of protection offered to people by the state and law enforcement who are witnesses to crimes or are informants on cases. The five people I interviewed work in both New Jersey and New York. Therefore, they could not give me information pertaining to the Baltimore judicial system specifically. This was one major limitation to my comparison of the show's portrayal of these two issues and the interviewee's experiences dealing with them throughout their careers.

Four of my five interviewees are criminal defense attorneys. All of them had experience working at the state level to some capacity. Still, the majority of them work on cases in the federal courts. Therefore their knowledge was primarily based on their experience with federal cases, including witnesses and police informants. One of the five attorneys did have a lot of experience working at the state level in both New Jersey and New York. The fifth interviewee is not an attorney but rather an employee at the District Attorney's office in Schenectady, New York. He is a head coordinator for the Crime Victims Unit, which primarily deals with domestic abuse cases at the state level. The answers provided by the interviewees are their personal beliefs and were not intended to represent the views of their respective offices.

All five of the interviewees had 10+ years of experience in their respective careers. Henry Klingeman has been an attorney for nearly 30 years. He initially worked as a prosecutor in the United States Attorney's office in New Jersey in the 1990s and then later became a criminal defense attorney starting his own firm. Since the beginning of his career, he has worked on numerous cases that have gone to trial. Linda Foster has been an attorney in New Jersey for 25 years. Kristen Santillo and Anna Cominsky have a similar background. They have worked as criminal defense attorneys for over 15 years and have taken several cases to trial. Linda Foster has a unique experience as a criminal defense attorney serving as a federal public defender. Before her role in the federal system, she worked on state-level cases. Ken Rulison has worked at the Schenectady District Attorney's office in the Crime Victims Unit for over 13 years. Their time working in the criminal justice system made them credible sources of information regarding what they have experienced in terms of witness protection programs and police informant harassment.

I created a guide of questions to help me navigate through the interviews I conducted. These questions were somewhat general about the issues I wanted to address during the interview process. I did not want to create a set of questions I had to ask for each person I spoke to because I assumed our conversations might go in different directions and vary based on the position each of them held in their careers. For example, I would not ask Ken Rulison about a client question because he is not an attorney, so questions about working directly on cases would yield limited results. However, his work in the Crimes Victims Unit does give him experience working with witnesses and watching cases closely that go through the Schenectady Court System. Additionally, I would not want to ask questions solely about the state-level protection programs because some of my interviewees have limited knowledge of the state judicial system

but have an exceedingly deep understanding of the federal system. Therefore, the broader the questions were, the better the answers I expected to receive from the people I interviewed.

My question guide included the following:

How long have you been in your career?

Do you have personal experience dealing with witnesses?

If so, how and in what ways?

Do you have personal experience dealing with police informants?

If so, how and in what ways?

Do you think from your experience that the police and government in your area of work have set up witness protection programs well or not?

Do you think from your experience that the police and government in your area of work have executed witness protection programs well or not?

Based on your experience in your career, do you feel that there needs to be less or more emphasis put on witness protection programs?

Have you seen witnesses and police informants threatened in cases you have worked through?

What are the consequences you have seen for people going to the police department to give them information about crimes that have occurred?

During most interviews, I asked these questions in order, but during other interviews, I had to rework my questioning to fit the flow of our conversation. Overall, I tried to obtain answers to these core questions. Additionally, I was only able to discuss the actual content of the show with Henry Klingeman because he was the only person out of the five to have previously watched *The Wire*. This did not affect my research, though, because I was not trying to have the interviewees assess the accuracy of the show but rather use their answers about the real-life legal system and compare them to what I analyzed from the content of the show.

Personal Experience with Witnesses and Police Informants

All of the five people I interviewed had some level of experience with witnesses and informants. The four attorneys had a greater level of exposure to witnesses. Many of them had used them in cases and even defended them in other cases. Ken Rulison presented a unique take on his experience with witnesses because of his in-depth background working with victims of

domestic violence. Ken Rulison's knowledge on witness protection and police informants came from what he has seen firsthand in his work with victims of crimes and observing court cases that involved victims he worked with.

The four attorneys had a different experience than Ken Rulison did because they had experienced either defending actual witnesses and observing the intimidation they faced or observing their clients being accused of doing the intimidating toward witnesses who testified against them. The four attorneys have all tried cases in court trials and have experienced witness testimony firsthand. Therefore, they provided useful information regarding what they have seen as far as witness harassment and what they have heard about police informant intimidation practices.

Views on Witness Protection Programs

The interviewees' descriptions of their views of witness protection programs varied based on their assessment of state versus federal protection programs. First, it was explained to me by both Henry Klingeman and Anna Cominsky that the phrase "Witness Protection Program" is used typically when discussing the federal protection program most of us know from films and television. The federal witness protection program takes a witness and gives them an entirely new identity and life that is completely apart from the one they lived before. They have no more contact with anyone from their previous life, and they are no longer known as that previous person. The federal witness protection program is also commonly referred to as "WitSec," short for Witness Security (Cominsky, 3/4/2021). Although it is rare for witnesses to go into this program, it does happen. The federal witness protection program is different from the more basic kind of witness protection which is known as a protective order. A protection order, as explained to me, is an order that mandates that any discovery (evidence) pertaining to a witness's testimony

or other information they provide both physically and verbally will not be presented to the defense and thereby the defendant until shortly before the witness testifies. Henry Klingeman told me he had one client who went into the protection program. He explained that this person had cut ties with every single person in his life except for Henry and that Henry was sworn to secrecy when he was in contact with him. Henry Klingeman also explained that there were times he knows about how witnesses enter the program but find the protective orders to be too strict and unreasonable, so they leave the program. This was a common theme among the lawyers and Ken Rulison's statements on witness protection. There seemed to be a consensus that following the orders meant to protect a witness can alter their way of life in ways they feel are too hard, so they do not follow through with them. In Ken Rulison's statements to me during our interview, he made it clear that in his experience, witnesses to gang activity rarely broke from their protective orders, but victims of domestic violence often disobeyed their orders to stay away from their abusers. However, he explained that this cycle of breaking protective orders as witnesses to a crime or victims of a crime was more psychological about domestic abuse and not necessarily relevant to the topic of other kinds of witnesses breaking their protective orders.

In regards to the different types of protections offered at the state versus federal level, the topic of funding also came up throughout nearly every interview I conducted. Anna Cominsky and Kristen Santillo explained that the federal prosecuting system relies heavily, if not entirely, on witness testimony and police informants. They build their cases off of information provided by lower-level people about higher-level people. Anna Cominsky put it in a very simple way "they arrest little man, then they hope the little man can give them the middle man, then the middle man gives them the big man" (3/4/2021). This process is something that is done mainly

by federal prosecutors because their system is much more sophisticated. Therefore, their systems to protect witnesses are also much more sophisticated.

Anna Cominsky and Kristen Santillo explained that the state-level system does not view witnesses as being as pertinent to their cases; therefore, they see less of a need to fund programs that would protect witnesses. Ken Rulison explained that the District Attorney's office has a "set amount of funding" that the courts can use when they need to put a witness in a hotel, for example, before they testify or more officers to sit outside the witness's house, etc. However, this fund is, of course, not as deep as the one the federal government has access to. Anna made a strong case for the fact that if states did prioritize witness protection funding, then maybe more people would know their programs exist and trust them enough to come forward, which would lead to more justice being served for all parties involved. As it remains now, the kind of protection that courts offer witnesses the most regularly comes in the form of a protection order. A protection order is something that can occur in both federal and state cases. All five of the interviewees brought up these types of orders. The goal of protection orders is to limit the exposure of the witness from the defendant who could potentially threaten them or send someone to intimidate or harm them.

When I discussed whether the levels of protections that are available for witnesses and informants are enforced properly by the court system, and by police, the answers varied based on who I was interviewing. Henry Klingeman, Anna Cominsky, Linda Foster, and Kristen Santillo said they believed the federal government does a thorough job protecting witnesses. Ken Rulison believed that judges do not always enforce their protective orders for domestic cases as well as they could. Anna Cominsky felt that judges oftentimes did enforce protective order well, in contrast to what Ken Rulison had told me. Cominsky felt rather that it typically is the prosecutors

who do a poor job at enforcing protocol in regards to witness and informant protection.

Cominsky and Rulison's respective careers create a level of bias toward their assessment of how the judicial system works in certain people's favor. Linda Foster told me that in her experience, she has felt that "prosecutors are receptive to the client's wishes" when they are cooperating with them and providing information. She also explained that she does not think there is a disparity between how prosecutors treat her clients who are in custody versus free out in the community.

As stated previously, many of the attorneys, specifically Anna Cominsky, felt that there was a lack of emphasis placed on state-level witness protection. It seemed from most of their answers that a greater emphasis on the state programs might yield more positive outcomes in the judicial system, whether that be more of the higher-level criminals being put in prisons, more justice brought to victims, or fairer trials for defendants. Based on the attorneys' assessments of the federal level programs put in place to protect witnesses, it appeared that they were efficient and well manufactured as is. I did not hear a lot of criticism of the way in which federal witnesses are treated.

Consequences: "Snitches Get Stitches" Fact or Fiction?

In every interview, the phrase "Snitches get stitches" rang true to some extent. This phrase was commonly said in season four of *The Wire* in some way or another. Being a "snitch" means that you have spoken to the police and given information about another person or incident which results in that person or group of people to face legal consequences. The meaning of "stitches" was said to be relative depending on the severity of the amount of information given or the importance of the legal case in question. In my interview with Linda Foster, I gained invaluable information about how her clients, predominantly blue-collar criminals, feel about cooperating or rather being perceived as cooperating with law enforcement and prosecutors. She

went into a detailed description of how she has had to come up with excuses for her clients to tell their fellow inmates in order to make them think they were not cooperating with anyone in his case. She explained that if her clients are in custody and they are seen leaving the jail too often, people on the inside of the jail will assume it is because they are meeting with prosecutors and making deals by providing information on other cases and therefore “snitching” on other people. Therefore, she has had to tell her clients to tell people that the judge had an emergency and needed to postpone meetings to set her client up with another excuse later on for why they are leaving the jail again to meet with her. Simply put, her clients will do whatever they can to prevent getting a reputation of being a cooperator. Sometimes, however, she has had to request that her clients be moved to cooperator-only facilities in which all the inmates are cooperators and therefore are not probably going to harm each other because they are all doing the same thing. Kristen Santillo said that “so many people are unwilling” to accept anything less than the bare minimum at sentencing because of the way it might look to her client’s community (Santillo, 3/4/2021). She explained that getting less than the bare minimum often is a result of a defendant making a plea deal and cooperating with the prosecutors. Therefore, even if the client did not cooperate but was given the opportunity to receive less time sentenced than the minimum, they refuse to take it because of the reputation they might gain. Every attorney I spoke with explained that the culture of “snitches get stitches” is a very prevalent phenomenon on the streets.

The types of consequences and forms of intimidation that witnesses and police informants receive vary, though. Linda Foster explained that the most common forms of intimidation are subtle but effective. Anna Cominsky made a similar statement. The two explained how intimidation toward a witness or informant could be in the form of a post on

social media that subtly calls out the person or a car driven by the person's house suspiciously. These forms of harassment are difficult to protect against because they are hard to prove are forms of intimidation. However, Linda Foster stated that most of her clients know of at least one person who suffered the most severe consequences (death or extreme levels of assault) a person can for testifying in a case or informing the police about an individual. Therefore, her clients are usually very intimidated by even the most subtle acts of harassment out of fear of what could potentially come next. Physically assaulting or even murdering a witness or informant might be much less common in the interviewee's experiences, but it is not unheard of in their line of work. However, it was made clear that the more high-profile the case, usually being at the federal level, the more a witness is in danger of a serious attack.

Conclusion

Overall, it became clear that harassment and assault against witnesses and police informants is a reality for many involved blue-collar crime cases. Henry Klingeman, Anna Cominsky, Kristen Santillo, and Ken Rulison shed light on this reality through their respective experiences working in the criminal justice system.

The information I gathered from my five interviews provided me with enough evidence to claim that *The Wire's* portrayal of witness protection and police informant harassment is accurate for the most part. There are certain scenes in season four involving witnesses and police informants that felt exaggerated for entertainment purposes based on what I learned from professionals who actually work within the judicial system. However, overall, the incidents in which *The Wire's* character's felt intimidated by members of the community if and when they testified or informed the police about an incident that had occurred was portrayed accurately. In

Chapter five, I will conclude my thesis by addressing the overarching importance of *The Wire's* accuracy in terms of its portrayal of social and political topics.

Chapter Five: *Conclusion*

In Chapter Three, I detailed my findings from my analysis of season four of *The Wire*. Throughout my analytical process, I determined how the series portrayed schools, law enforcement, the drug trade/criminal activity, and politics in Baltimore. The conclusions I came to were that the show perceived the public school systems in the city as being run-down and poorly equipped to adequately teach the students who came in and out of its classrooms. The teachers themselves appeared overwhelmed and frustrated. The police department was depicted as being made up of mostly bad officers, either because they were truly malicious characters who terrorized the city or because they were not completing basic police tasks well. There were very few officers who were portrayed as mostly good people who sought to do the right thing by the communities in Baltimore. The drug trade and almost all criminal activity were portrayed as being a multifaceted issue in which the players within it had both good and bad attributes. The networks of drug dealers behaved in a very business-like manner and conducted themselves through a set of rules that almost all leaders followed. Lastly, politics and politicians were perceived as being mostly corrupt and failing the communities they were meant to serve. The newest variables in the political world were no match for the long history of corruption in the political systems in Baltimore.

In Chapter Four, I discussed my findings from a number of interviews I conducted with people who work in the criminal justice system. I assessed the accuracy of *The Wire's* portrayal of witness protection and police informant harassment based on the discussions and answers I received from Henry Klingman, Anna Cominsky, Kristen Santillo, and Ken Rulison. From what I learned through the interviews I had with them, I felt that the show had taken care and caution when creating the storylines involving witnesses and police informants. In some instances in

season four of *The Wire*, there were clearly actions taken against witnesses to crimes and police informants that were exaggerated potentially for entertainment purposes. However, overall, a lot of what I analyzed in the season was accurate based on the experiences I had with the five professionals I interviewed. My conclusions made in Chapter Four based on my findings led me to the assumption that *The Wire* was potentially portraying most other topics and themes accurately as well.

Limitations

With my research process came obvious limitations to my findings. I only focused on one season of the show. While it was one of the final seasons, and therefore the show's characters were developed, and certain plotlines were carried over from previous seasons, it would be wrong to assume that season four was a perfect representation of the entire show. Therefore, any findings from season four cannot be generalized into formal assessments about the entire series. I can only make assumptions based on my previous knowledge of the seasons I have watched.

From the prior episodes I watched in season one, two and three of *The Wire* I can assume that the show's overall accuracy in portraying the events it did was carried out throughout the entire series. The show continued similar character development and plot line progression throughout the entire five season series.

Additionally, my analysis methods were not about how audiences, in general, took in the information the show provided but rather how I alone consumed the content. In the future, it would be interesting if researchers did conduct a thorough study of viewership of *The Wire* and how it affects people's opinions and views. My time, however, was limited, and I could not conduct such a thorough analysis that would yield different kinds of results.

Finally, I would be remiss to pretend that my own background did not present cause for possible limitations to my content analysis of *The Wire*. The reason I came to this decision to analyze the show was because of my interest in crime and how American society deals with and views impoverished communities. I grew up in a household of two lawyers, who for most of my life were criminal defense attorneys. Seeing the law from their perspective has shaped my view of many issues in a way that I know others might not share with me. Therefore, my experience seeing my parents defend people accused of crimes puts me in a position to be biased toward the characters in *The Wire* who are accused of crimes. I can assume that if I were someone who had law enforcement officers in my family, I might feel the opposite way. I might lack empathy for those who are accused of crimes due to the conversations about people of that nature discussed in my house growing up. In a more general sense, my interest in researching the topics I did, law enforcement, drug trade, criminal activity, corruption in school systems, and politics, also stems from how I was raised. Other people might not view these topics the way I do because they might not care in the way I have been taught by my parents to care. All of these personal conditions contribute to any potential bias I might have toward certain characters and issues discussed in *The Wire* and, therefore, contributes to how I interpreted the show's content. Thus, ultimately my background influenced the results of my analysis in some respect.

The Relevancy of The Wire Today

The Wire was created in 2002 and concluded its final season in 2008. The show officially turned 18 in June of 2020. While the creators made the characters and plot lines out of the information they had nearly two decades ago, many of the themes and people within the show remain relevant to what we see in American society today regarding our legal system, corruption within it, politics, crime, and more.

Many of the same issues discussed in the show in season four remain prevalent in the United States in 2021, especially due to the recent events involving the Black Lives Matter Movement and the protests that ensued throughout the spring and summer of 2020. Several events since the show's finale have occurred in the country to demonstrate that racism and police brutality are alive and well in many communities across the United States. *The Wire* touched on these issues in the earliest years of the 21st century. As David Simon, the show's creator, mentioned since he started working on the show, he wanted to bring audiences a television series that was fictional and entertaining but brought awareness to issues communities in the United States were dealing with at the time and to spark discussions on the topics the show discussed.

Any show that is able to summon such widespread attention for several years while it is being aired and then well after it ends holds an undeniable amount of power in the world of media influence on popular culture and, therefore, on public opinion. *The Wire* is one of those shows. In 2020, *Vanity Fair* published two separate articles on the discussion of *The Wire*'s timelessness. In the first article published in March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic quarantine in the United States, the article briefly spoke to the show's continued cult-following. In one line, the author stated that "according to Variety, HBO's parent company, WarnerMedia, says that viewership of *The Wire* has nearly tripled in the last week on HBO Now, its streaming service" (Desta, 2020). In the second article, David Simon, the show's creator, discusses the show's continued relevance in 2020. In this article titled "*The Wire* Forever: David Simon on Quarantine Favorite and his Equally Pissed-Off New Show, The Plot Against America," Maureen Ryan sat down with David Simon and interviewed him on the show's apparent comeback during the quarantine. In the initial months of the pandemic, viewership of *The Wire* rose on HBO because people began to have large quantities of time that they had not

had before. Simon explained in the interview that while he and his co-creators were writing *The Wire*, they had intended it to be consumed as a “whole” rather than in pieces by seasons. He acknowledges that when the show was created in 2002, serving the series to viewers as a whole was nearly impossible because of the way television shows worked at the time. Simon said, “We didn’t anticipate DVDs, and of course, we didn’t conceive of streaming. We were actually launching it into a world that wasn’t ready for the presumption of what we were doing. But the world got there, and got there fast.” He later points out that the way people are consuming it in the new age of streaming services is actually “better” than how they were consuming it before because it allows viewers to consume the series altogether which was his initial goal.

David Simon touched on the importance of making the show entertaining to audiences in order to “sustain a sociopolitical argument.” Season two was about the loss of seaport jobs due to capitalism. Simon made it clear in the interview with *Vanity Fair* that many critics and viewers, in general, did not like season two because of its lack of criminal edge and excitement (Ryan, 2020). However, he thought it was necessary to include the season to bring in topics surrounding capitalism, but he also knew that he had to make the next three seasons about drug-related topics because that is what kept viewers interested. Therefore, his goal ultimately was to create a show that was worthy of socio political discussion but needed it to be exciting and entertaining to maintain a fanbase who could have these discussions. It can be assumed then that the rise in viewership of *The Wire* in 2020 during the pandemic furthered the discussions David Simon and his co-creators had intended viewers to be having upon watching the series.

One of the most apparent links to the show's continued relevance in 2020 and in 2021 is that people began watching and/or re-watching the nearly 20-year-old show right as the Black Lives Matter Movement had its resurgence. The BLM movement and the topics discussed in *The*

Wire regarding the police's abuses of power, the crime rates in communities of color, and overarching themes of racism and brutality are inextricably linked. In the five seasons, *The Wire* aired, the series addressed many topics regarding failing school systems, police departments and political corruption, and the ongoing drug war in Baltimore. All these topics are still relevant today in hundreds of cities across the country. The issues of systemic racism are shown through the four topics mentioned above throughout each season of *The Wire*. David Simon's point that the show held power to spark discussions among its viewers about socio-political issues in 2002 is still true today. The resurgence of viewership of *The Wire* during a period of time in the United States when political activism against systemic racism is incredibly important because it shows that the series continues to be relevant.

Looking Toward the Future

The Wire holds the undeniable potential to alter the way people think about issues regarding deep-rooted racism and socio-economic inequality in the United States. The unfortunate truth about Baltimore is that over the past 18 years since *The Wire* aired, the rate of homicide has not remained the same-- it has increased pretty dramatically. In 2002 the murder/homicide rate was 37.7 percent; in 2018, it was 51.04 percent (Macrotrends, 2018). The Baltimore Sun recorded 335 victims of homicide in 2020, 348 in 2019, 309 in 2018, 342 in 2017, and 318 in 2016 (The Baltimore Sun, 2021). *The Wire* addressed Baltimore's rising crime rate through its storylines about the city and its crime networks.

The Wire was a pioneer in the crime genre of television and film because it discussed topics in a very brutally truthful way. While the show was entertaining, it was put together in an incredibly thoughtful and careful manner that presented the stories of the characters within it in a way that resembled reality in Baltimore. In 2020, we still see the effects of top-down failures in

the American judicial system and school systems. The show is taught in higher education institutions for a reason because of its innate ability to be used as a source text to describe legal practices and discussions on race, crime, poverty, and more. I believe that if the show were to be taught in high schools in a similar manner that it is taught in undergraduate and graduate schools, there is a real potential for change in our country's approach to systemic issues.

In my experience in both public and private schools in a middle-to-upper class community on the east coast, these topics pertaining to systemic failures in the United States were rarely addressed, and when they were addressed, they barely penetrated the surface. I had to actively seek out discussions regarding these topics in high school and courses in college to learn more about poverty, crime, and racism in the U.S. I do not say this to receive praise for trying to learn more about these issues. I say this because this should not be the case in the United States.

If *The Wire* was used as a source text in the curriculum that English classes must teach in American schools in high school, students from all demographics would benefit greatly. The series is both entertaining and enlightening. The show has the ability to alter the way students view the topics the show addresses. Through the implementation of *The Wire* in high school curriculum, teachers could moderate discussions about inequality in impoverished communities in the U.S. in a way that could dive deeper below the surface and create a change in the mindset many people of the younger generation have in American society.

This thesis aimed to provide a well-rounded content analysis of season four of *The Wire* and then dive slightly deeper into the issues our legal system has with witness protection and police informant harassment. In the future, I would like to see researchers dive deeper into the effect the television series has on the public's opinion of more issues discussed in the show. By gauging the impact that the series has on the public could provide evidence that the show is

important to teach in high schools across the country. This would expose so many more people from varying demographics to the issues our society has regarding our legal system and more.

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