HOW THE MEDIA SHAPE
THE PUBLIC’S PERCEPTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

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Rebecca Morey
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APPROVAL SHEET

This senior seminar paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Bachelor of Arts

Rebecca Morey (Electronic Signature)

Rebecca Morey
Approved, December 2015

________________________________________

Lana A. Whited, Ph.D., Senior Seminar Professor

________________________________________

Billy Long, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Criminal Justice

________________________________________

Karen Duddy, Ph.D., Instructor of English Writing Center Coordinator & Coordinator of Writing Center

________________________________________

Karl Roeper, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Media & Communications
HONOR BOARD POLICY COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

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Rebecca Morey (Electronic Signature)

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Rebecca Morey

December 11, 2015

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Date
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Rebecca Morey (Electronic Signature)

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Rebecca Morey

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Abstract

There are stories of police misconduct and police brutality displayed every day in the media whether it is on television, in the newspaper, on the radio, or on social media. The world is exposed to some kind of media every day. The constant display of the same news story gives the image that police brutality is a more prevalent thing that occurs however, through Bureau of Justice Statistics and Gallup Poll surveys, show that police brutality is not a prevalent as it is perceived. To understand the purpose of police a person would have to look at the factors of crime as well as the history of policing to get a better understanding. Looking at two case studies, on focusing on how the media impacted the public’s perception and another looking at how a police officer conducted himself and the public’s response and media’s influence on it, show the power the media has. Entertainment media is also another important thing that influence the public’s opinion because if a person is not watching the news they may be watching a television show or a movie. There are steps that not only law enforcement can take but also the media and the public to help reduce the tension that has been exacerbated by the media’s portrayal of law enforcement. The major take away is that something needs to happen to reduce the tension otherwise protest and unrest will continue to happen pushing the nation further away from being able to resolve the conflicts.
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How the Media Shape the Public’s Perception of Law Enforcement

“Police officer shoots man during traffic stop.”

“Officer killed in the line of duty following a bizarre attack.”

“Police officer shoots dog.”

“Cops shoot and kill man in wheelchair.”

These headlines and many others like them are seen and heard by average citizens on a daily basis, when they turn on their televisions, look on the internet, and even when they listen to the radio. Daily news stories like these help to create an impression that law enforcement officers commit violent attacks on people every day and the violence they use is horrendous. By focusing on such stories, the media give the impression that acts of police brutality are increasing, a perception that helps to generate a view that law enforcement officers are out of control. Even though the general public’s perception of law enforcement is that they are out to get the people or they are aggressive, there are steps that police departments as well as the public can take to change those perceptions, which in turn can help change the reputation of law enforcement to help alleviate the tension that this perception has caused.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should acknowledge that my stepfather is a police officer; he has been on the job for 25 years. My stepdad was easily identifiable in the community by his uniform. The way in which I view police departments or police officers is affected
because of the way I was raised. I have grown up believing that police officers do great things for the community. However, I am not naïve, and I realize that some police officers have made mistakes or used poor decision making; I know there are officers who have committed acts of violence against the public. I also realize that the media’s coverage of these incidents has impacted the public perceptions of police departments. However, it is important for the public to understand that there is a small number of officers who commit these acts and that police brutality is not as big a problem as media makes it out. In addition, the way law enforcement officers are sometimes portrayed in the entertainment media has helped to create the hostility and tension that is spreading around our nation today. There are ways that not only the public but also law enforcement and the media can help to change the reputation of law enforcement and to help alleviate the tension.

The increased coverage of police brutality by the media happened because of the transformation of media from being only nightly to now being 24 hours. This has not helped to decrease the tension between law enforcement and the general public or to help increase the reputation of police departments. Mass media are vehicles through which messages are disseminated to mass audiences (Vivian, 2). There are two different types of mass media that I am discussing in my paper; the first of which being the news media. The most visible mass media-delivered information is news. This is the most important media because this is where most people get their information about what is going on and many people trust it to provide accurate and quick information. It is also the oldest. However, there are biases that occur because the news media decides what it would like to show, how long it would show, and what
information is important. Local news is the primary news source for two-thirds of Americans. Sixty one percent of all lead stories on local news are dedicated to crime, fires, disasters, and accidents. Heavy viewers of local news are more likely to perceive black people in general as violent. In reality, white people are 4.7 times more likely to be victimized by another white person than by a black person (Mean World Syndrome). The second type of media is entertainment media. Entertainment media includes movies, videos and pretty much and type of media that entertains the public. The reason to include entertainment media is because movies and television are places where, if they are not watching the news, they are watching a movie or a television show.

One aspect of media is media technology which is something like the Internet to include social media. I will not cover social media in this these as much because even though the internet has surpassed television users because of its ability to allow users to stay connected and reach people that television cannot, it encompasses a large amount of other things. Internet also allows the user to watch what they want to watch and when they want to watch it unlike television. The internet also includes social media, which allows users to get or give information at rapid speeds. For example, there was a woman named Justine Sacco who tweeted “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!” In the span of her 12 hour flight to South Africa, her small twitter account of 500 people jumped to thousands of people and she had become an internet phenomenon and she did not even know because her flight did not have internet. As soon as she had landed, she had lost her job and many of her friends and family were disappointed about what she had said. This is just one of many examples of how social media
can take something small and make it bigger. Which is a common thing that happens in the media.

To understand why the public believes that police brutality has increased, a person would find it helpful to go back and look at the way the roles of law enforcement have evolved. American policing evolved from the English system. In 1631, after local ordinances allowed for constables, the townspeople formed a “watch” that was made up of six watchmen, one constable, and several volunteers who did patrols at night (Johnson 1). A watch system was put into place during the colonial times, and it consisted of men from the community who volunteered to be put into a watch group (Archbold, C.” 3). The watch group was in charge of providing social services, which included lighting street lamps, running soup kitchens, recovering lost children, capturing runaway animals, and several other tasks (Archbold, C.” 3). The watch group’s involvement in crime control was minimal, and it was therefore ineffective not only because it did not have a lot of involvement in crime control but also because it was volunteer-based and used disorganized methods of patrol (Archbold, C. 3). In early law enforcement, watchmen’s actions were reactionary, rather than pre-emptive, meaning that they would only respond to calls of criminal behavior if a victim or witness requested it (Johnson 1). By the late 1700s, citizen watch groups were not able to handle the increasing social unrest and rioting that was occurring in colonial America (Archbold, C. 3).

The same kind of social unrest and rioting occurring in colonial America was happening in England as well. One person in particular had a goal of creating a police force to manage the social conflict that occurred because of the rapid urbanization and industrialization that was
happening in London at the time (Archbold, C. 3). Sir Robert Peel’s efforts to manage the social conflict helped to create the London Metropolitan Police, which scholars and historians deem the first modern police department (Archbold, C. 3). Peel believed that the London Metropolitan Police’s focus should be on crime prevention, meaning preventing crime before it happens by detecting it, instead of waiting until it happens and then responding (Archbold, C. 3). In order to do this he created the idea of “beat areas” where the police would coordinate and centralize to provide cover to a large area both day and night, to increase the police’s visibility and consequently help deter crime. This approach deters crime because if an individual has the idea to steal something, then he or she will think twice about doing it if there is a large police presence in the area, reducing the probability of the individual getting away with the crime. This helped the police become more effective because they were more organized in the way that they patrolled or watched an area.

Peel also had many ideas on how to make the police more reputable in the eyes of the public. He believed that officers should be properly vetted to ensure that only high-quality officers were being placed on the job and that those officers should receive appropriate training so that they could be effective in their work (Archbold, C. 4). He also believed that his men should wear uniforms with large display numbers to allow the citizens to easily identify the officer and that officers should not carry guns (Archbold, C. 4). Another thing that Peel strongly emphasized was this idea of “citizen police” in which the public is the police and the police is the public. In addition, it is each individual citizen’s responsibility to prevent crime. Many of Peel’s ideas were adopted by American police agencies and are still in use today (Archbold, C. 4).
After the 1700s and moving into the 1800s, politics became more involved in policing. Politicians hired and retained officers as a way to maintain their own political power, and the officers would not only be employed but they would also encourage citizens to vote for the politician who retained them (Archbold, C. 6). Politicians had a hand in hiring the police chief, and those police chiefs would have little control over the decision-making that went into how the agencies were run and how those decisions would affect their employees (Archbold, C. 6). The primary concern of the political bosses was hiring officers that would help them stay in office, not hiring officers who were qualified for the job (Archbold, C. 6).

As a way to better facilitate communication between patrol officers, police supervisors, central headquarters, and the public, call boxes that contained a telephone with a direct line to police headquarters were implemented (Archbold, C. 7). Call boxes helped with officer accountability because the officer would be required to respond to an incident. This is because before officers would frequently be in local establishments like bars and not on the streets that they should have been patrolling in.

Police corruption and misconduct were common, often due to the relationship with politics; this misconduct included things like election-rigging or persuading people to vote a certain way, abuse of power and authority, and misuse of force by officers (Archbold, C. 8). The police during that time believed that violence was the way to handle an unruly citizen or a citizen that was acting unlawfully. They also believed that violence was more effective than incarceration in deterring juveniles and that violence could be used to coerce confessions or get information out of people (Archbold, C. 8).
A reform in policing in the 1900s involved getting politics out of policing. Standards were created for recruiting and hiring police officer and people in administration to ensure that politicians would not be able appoint individuals to help them further their political agendas (Archbold, C. 9). Another goal was to make the police more professional by increasing the quality of the officers hired but also providing them with better police training. Police departments also adopted various technological advances like two-way radios to help with day-to-day operations (Archbold, C. 9). The professionalization of police departments resulted in the primary focus being crime control. The Wickersham Commission report of 1931 proposed that police officers could more effectively deal with rising crime by focusing the duties on crime control and not providing social services like they had in eras before (Archbold, C. 9). This emphasis on crime control created a disconnect between officers and the public because when citizens called for service of a noncriminal nature, the police would respond only with a heavy emphasis on crime control (Archbold, C. 10).

This disconnect continued with the social movement involving race relations in the 1950s. Social disorder resulting from protests, marches, and rioting in the 1960s caused more frequent physical clashes between the police and the public (Archbold, C. 10). These physical clashes were caught on camera and thus displayed on televisions and seen in newspapers, which allowed more people to view a level of violence between police and citizens that they had never seen before, creating issues in public relations. People were completely shocked by the level of violence they were seeing. This issue with public relations led to another reform in policing that went to focusing on responding to calls for service and managing crimes in a reactive manner.
This means the focus is on serious crimes instead of social disorder and increasing citizens’ quality of life (Archbold, C. 11). There was a great importance placed on the number of arrests made or how fast an officer responded to a citizen’s call for service. This policing strategy does not involve having a cooperative effort between the police and citizens (Archbold, C. 11). Because that policing strategy does not involve a cooperative effort between the police and citizens, it is causing issues in society.

To understand the misconceptions of police misconduct by the public, a person has to look at the factors of crime. If a person lives in a neighborhood in which violence is a constant theme, the person will see that violence is the appropriate response to any dispute or disrespect they may receive. This is not to say that in every situation, a person will respond with violent aggression. However, it is the perpetrator’s willingness to resort to violence that becomes the issue. For example, a 16-24 year old male who lives in a subculture of violence may have a need to fit in with a group. This need may open the opportunity for him to be involved with activities that can get him in trouble with the law or even dead. The norm in that subculture may be to carry a knife or some kind of weapon to show that this young man are serious and should not be messed with. A young male who does not believe in violence but lives in a violent culture and feels the need to fit in may go along with the rest of his friends and commit those acts of violence. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many of these individuals have severe deficits in “cultural capital” (e.g., vocabulary skills, dispute resolution skills, disrespect for authority etc.). (Wolfgang).
To suppress his guilt about participating in violence, the same young man could use Sykes and Matza’s techniques of neutralization. The techniques of neutralization are denial of responsibility, denial of injury, appealing to higher loyalties, and condemnation of condemners. A person may use denial of responsibility and say that the government is not taking care of me, I live in a bad part of town and so it is not my fault (University of Missouri). For example, if a young man robbed a woman outside of a store then the young man might use denial of victim and say that no one got hurt and that the women could afford the loss. Using that same example, the young man could say that she did not get hurt therefore, there is no injury, which would be denial of injury. If the young man were caught and said that he did this for his friend who needed the money for rent then the young man was appealing to higher loyalties. The last technique of neutralization is condemnation of condemners; if the young man was being arrested for assault and battery he may say to the cop, “you were just as bad as me when you were growing up” or “by coming into this neighborhood and ordering me around you precipitated it” (University of Missouri). If the young man decided not to participate in the accepted or required violence, he will likely be ostracized from the group and in turn emasculated (University of Missouri).

In addition to the influence of the subculture of violence, the behaviors, customs and origins of people plays into the sociological factor of crime and Miller’s theory of focal concerns of the lower class. The lower class may not be the is primary group of people that is involved in police contacts, but because of the culture they live in there is a higher likelihood that they would come into contact with police officers. In the lower class, the idea of physical strength and masculinity are very important and correlates with Miller’s concern of toughness. The fear of
getting caught violating societal rules (e.g., engaging in welfare fraud) is a constant stressor to these people. This, in turn, leads to friction during police–citizen encounters. As a result, hostility between the poor and police is more likely. Smartness is demonstrated in the lower class by being “street-wise” and able to out insult people, this can lead to hostile interactions with other people and often police officers. With those hostile interactions comes the next concern which is fate dealing with an external locus of control. A person may believe that other people are controlling them and that the police are against them and the judges are taking bribes and there is nothing they can do to change it. The last concern goes hand-in-hand with fate is autonomy in which people who have these concerns feel extreme resentment towards governmental programs because they take away their freedom. For example, a person might say something like, “the courts decide what punishment I get”, “the government decides how much welfare I get”, or “the school decides if I graduate or not”.

Even if someone understands the theories of crime, they may still wonder why police officers use so much force in dealing with the public. However, they may not realize that police departments are more cautious now than before when talking about use of force. This is because the department or the officer can be sued, as well as increased in-service training, and department accreditation with strict standards on the appropriate use of force. The definition of brutality has changed to include more behaviors. According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, there are approximately 670,000 police officers in the United States. Those officers come into contact with citizens approximately 53,000,000 times per annum. Contact can include the citizens being pulled over, interviewed by the police about a crime, requesting services, being a
disabled motorist, being arrested, having consensual contact, etc. Of those contacts, there are only 26,000 formal complaints filed, and of those complaints, 92% are frivolous. Therefore, only 8% or approximately 2080 complaints filed have merit meaning .0039% of police contacts end in a sustained complaint. To compare the likelihood of being involved in police brutality is 1 to 25,505 meaning you are 15 times more likely to die in a traffic accident than be involved in a sustained complaint against the police because of their misconduct (Police Brutality Statistics).

The confidence that the public has with law enforcement shown by two different Gallup Polls shows that even though there perception that acts of misconduct by the police are frequent in number, these polls show that the public still has a lot of confidence in the police. One Gallup poll conducted in 2014 shows that there is a difference in confidence in police, depending on race. The poll’s results showed that when “combined the 2011-2014 data measuring Americans' confidence in the police it showed that 59% of whites have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police, compared with 37% of blacks” (Gallup). This poll also questioned on the opinions about the honesty and ethics of police officers and the confidence in the criminal justice system which yielded the same results as before. “Blacks have significantly lower levels of confidence in the police as an institution, and lower assessments of the honesty and ethics of police officers specifically” (Gallup).

The Gallup poll conducted after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, “showed major black-white differences in perceptions of the case and the way the criminal justice system was handling it”. There is a trend going back in time to the O.J. Simpson case in the 1990s in which “blacks and whites had similarly starkly different views of the criminal justice system. (Gallup)”
An updated study conducted in 2015 stated that while many Americans have confidence in the police, “52% of Americans currently express "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police institution, tying the low in Gallup's 22-year trend. Confidence has ranged fairly narrowly between 52% and 64% since 1993 (Gallup).” However, even though the percentage has decreased confidence the law enforcement has remained in top of the highest-ranking institutions behind small business owners and the military of the 15 that Gallup polls to include Congress, Banks, the Medical system, etc.

This decrease can be attributed to the actions of police in certain U.S. cities -- including Ferguson, Missouri; Staten Island, New York; and North Charleston, South Carolina -- which have recently come under scrutiny after black men were killed while being apprehended by white police officers. These events likely contributed to the decline in confidence in police, although it is important to note that Americans' trust in police has not been fundamentally shaken -- it remains high in an absolute sense, despite being at a historical low” (Gallup). The information that has come out of Florida, Missouri, New York, or South Carolina has come primarily from the media. These acts of violence have gotten a lot of media attention which allows people to make their decisions about how they feel about the police.

An example is a case in Sanford Florida, in which a young man by the name of Trayvon Martin was killed. CNN reported that Trayvon Martin was staying with his father in Stanford, after receiving a ten-day suspension from school because drug residue was found in his book bag. On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman, who was a neighborhood watch captain, called 911 to report a suspicious person and the dispatch told Zimmerman not to make contact with the
person and to stay in his vehicle, which he did not do. After he disregarded the instructions of dispatch, neighbors heard and reported gunfire. Zimmerman stated that he did shoot Martin but stated that it was in self-defense. Similar information was posted on USA Today but the USA Today article gave the reader a rundown of how the event happened, versus just a time line, as in the CNN article. The USA Today article also gave more information about the incident, including the police report as well as pictures of the scene, which allows readers to get a little more information about what happened on the date of the incident. The fact that this was a complicated case in which not a lot of information was available at the time increased the public’s desire for information and justice, and with that desire came pressure from the public to have Zimmerman arrested and tried in a court of law. The internet and the media played a role in it because, as the CNN article explained, there was a petition on Change.org that called for the arrest of Zimmerman; the parents of Trayvon Martin created this petition and the names on the petition surpassed 1.3 million people. This was one of the first cases that demonstrated the power of the internet to bring pressure on the criminal justice system.

Another case study is in Ferguson Missouri, where a young man by the name of Michael Brown was killed. According to The New Yorker, Darren Wilson, the police officer, was getting ready to have lunch when a call came out for a theft in progress and when Wilson replied on the radio the suspects had disappeared and the trail had gone cold. That was when Wilson came across Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson walking in the middle of the street. After a verbal command was given, there is some discrepancy as to what was said, Wilson presumed, based on the description of the robbery suspects from the radio and after seeing the cigarillos,
which were the items stolen from the convenience store, that these individuals were the ones involved in the theft. Wilson called for backup and parked his car at an angle barricading the roadway. As Wilson tried to exit his vehicle, Brown blocked his way and the situation escalated quickly. According to witnesses and Wilson, Brown reached into the open window of Wilson’s car, grabbed Wilson, and punched him. At this point, Wilson stated that his training kicked in and he reviewed his options as to what weapons were at his disposal; they included mace, a baton, and his gun, and the only one he could reach was his gun. When Wilson unclipped his gun, Brown reached for it, and in an ensuing struggle, Wilson shot Brown in the hand. After that, Brown took off running, Wilson followed, and then Brown turned back to Wilson. Wilson told Brown repeatedly to stop and get on the ground, but Brown, who was unarmed, did not comply and kept moving. Sometime after or during the chase, Wilson shot ten times at Brown. He missed a few but Brown was hit in the chest, the forehead, and the arm. When Brown was shot, he collapsed and an ambulance came by and the paramedic pronounced Brown dead. Brown was kept on the ground on scene for four hours because many residents had come out, delaying the processing of the scene. Many of the residents were yelling “kill the police”; this kind of unrest continued through the night, and protests continued for weeks. The media’s unwillingness to wait to get all of the information out helped to contribute to the unrest. The preliminary investigations and Officer Dorian Johnson’s report stated that Brown was shot in the back and his hands were up. This was disproven after the Justice Department report came out but because the news media wanted to get the information out they did not wait for the facts. The story of Brown having his hands up and Wilson shooting led to the protestors saying “Hands Up,
Don’t Shoot” and even though the information was shown to be wrong in the published report, it had already spread to the nation and people disregarded the facts of the case. In this *New Yorker* article, one person that the reporter interviewed named Rasheen Aldridge stated that he had believed that Brown was in surrender mode when Wilson shot him because of what he had heard and read. Therefore, what he had heard and read shaped his view of what happened even though it was not what really happened.

Social media also played a role in the protests surrounding Ferguson. In the case of Ferguson, social media helped facilitate the protest because of its ability to provide information to include when the protest is and what time but also how safe the protest is and how many people are participating. It can also help motivate individuals to participate in the protest because of the emotions that are triggered but also the feelings of injustice that have occurred. That is not to say that everyone who looks at the social media posts to include tweets or Facebook posts, will participate but because the information is highly available then they will potentially be more inclined to participate.

The public’s perception of law enforcement has bled into entertainment media, which also shapes the public’s perception. There are several movies that make police officers seem incompetent and unable to do their job. One example would be *21 Jump Street (2014)*, the *Internet Movie Database* description of which states, “A pair of underachieving cops are sent back to a local high school to blend in and bring down a synthetic drug ring.” So even though this movie is supposed to be humorous and poke fun at law enforcement, some people may be confirmed in a belief that law enforcement is, a joke. In the movie, the two officers did not
know the Miranda rights, which any law enforcement officer who has graduated from a training academy would know. Another example of how they were portrayed as dumb would be in the beginning where they are tossing their guns in the air and pointing the guns as each other which any police officer would know would be grossly inappropriate but also extremely dangerous not only for the two officers but for anyone around then if one of them accidentally pulled the trigger.

Another movie in which law enforcement officers are portrayed in a negative way would be Super Troopers (2001), described by IMBD as “Five Vermont state troopers, avid pranksters with a knack for screwing up, try to save their jobs and out-do the local police department by solving a crime.” Just as the description states, these state troopers are not focused on doing their jobs but on screwing up and playing jokes on each other and also the public. One of the famous scenes in the movie is when they pull over an individual for speeding and one of the officers decides to play a game in which the officer sees how many times the officer can say meow during the traffic stop. This shows the officers lack of professionalism in dealing with the public. There are several other scenes in which the officers fulfill the stereotype that police officers are mean or rude to the general public.

Another movie is “Let’s Be Cops” (2014) in which “Two struggling pals dress as police officers for a costume party and become neighborhood sensations. But when these newly-minted "heroes" get tangled in a real life web of mobsters and dirty detectives, they must put their fake badges on the line.” This makes law enforcement officers out to be people who do not need to go to training to become officers. In one of the scenes of the movie, one of the people learns what
he thinks he needs to know from YouTube videos. He also does not realize or take into account
that rules and regulations are different for each department nationwide. These are just a few of
the movies that depict a negative view of law enforcement. Some of the other movies that give
law enforcement a negative view is Pall Blart Mall Cop, Police Academy, Hot Fuzz and The
Other Guys.

However, there are a few movies that depict the struggle of being a law enforcement
officer or gives the audience a better idea of what law enforcement officers go through. One
movie that shows the not necessarily positive view of police but what it is like for a person in
law enforcement is S.W.A.T. This movie, according to IMBD, is about “an imprisoned drug
kingpin offers a huge cash reward to anyone that can break him out of police custody and only
the LAPD's Special Weapons and Tactics team can prevent it.” This movie explains the training
that goes into becoming a S.W.A.T member and shows the audience the hard work and real life
situations that these officers have to prepare themselves for.

Another one of those movies is End of Watch; according to IMBD is a movie “Shot
documentary-style that follows the daily grind of two young police officers in LA who are
partners and friends, and what happens when they meet criminal forces greater than themselves.”
In the movie the audience is allowed to see the real insight into a life of a police officer. One
quote in the movie is when Brian Taylor, who is one of the officers says,

I am the police, and I'm here to arrest you. You've broken the law. I did not write the law.
I may even disagree with the law but I will enforce it. No matter how you plead, cajole,
beg or attempt to stir my sympathies, nothing you do will stop me from placing you in a steel cage with gray bars. If you run away I will chase you. If you fight me I will fight back. If you shoot at me I will shoot back. By law I am unable to walk away. I am a consequence. I am the unpaid bill. I am fate with a badge and a gun. Behind my badge is a heart like yours. I bleed, I think, I love, and yes I *can* be killed. And although I am but one man, I have thousands of brothers and sisters who are the same as me. They will lay down their lives for me, and I them. We stand watch together. The thin-blue-line, protecting the prey from the predators, the good from the bad. We are the police.

These are the opening lines of the movies and really explain what most officers feel about their job. Even though in the beginning part of the movie, there is a shootout and a gunfight ensues and that would not happen every day it is the possibility that it could happen at any time. They may not completely agree with every law but they swore an oath to protect the citizen of their state or district. However, the most important thing that was said in this beginning scene is “behind my badge is a heart like yours,” and the reason it is important is because the men and women of law enforcement are also fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, as well as husbands and wives.

With the quote of “Behind this badge is a heart like yours,” the public as well as law enforcement can help with the purpose of changing the general public’s view of policing by helping the public to understand that police officers are people just like them. Though there are complaints filed that do have merit as explained previously, there are policies set in place to help deal with the possibility of decreasing the small amount of police misconduct or brutality. One of
the ways to help would be to increase community policing. Community policing “is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime. (Community Policing Defined)” The purpose of community policing is to make police officers more visible in the community to help deter crime as well as allow the general public to feel safer because officers are more visible. Community policing can involve routine patrols that increase the visibility of law enforcement to reduce the fear of crime. Police departments that use community policing also enforce “quality of life laws” (public drinking, loitering, panhandling, etc.). Community policing’s emphasis on these times of laws dramatically result in less crime, lower the fear of crime and increase the police-community relations. Another example of community policing would be programs like D.A.R.E (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs in schools. These programs are implemented in order to inform the public about how to say no to drugs and how to not be a victim of crime. Because this program is run by police officers, it allows children to see that officers are not scary people and are actually able to help them.

Another component of community policing involves getting the community engaged. This can be done with programs like National Night Out, which is done in many places around the nation. The point of this program is to get the community out to enjoy the day but also meet the officers who may work in their neighborhoods. The community can also learn about what is going on in their neighborhoods and learn how to be more proactive in making sure that the community they live in is safe but also how to keep their family safe.
Another way that the police departments can help change these perceptions involves cultural competency training. Cultural competency training can involve videos or presentations given to police departments to allow the officers to get a better understanding of the types of people they will be in contact with; in learning about other cultures, officers can potentially prevent conflict. Cultural competency training is widely used in the health profession but it is also a very valuable thing for law enforcement officers to have and use. If an officer is aware of his or her cultural biases, then he or she can work to change his or her attitude towards people of a certain culture. For example, if an officer is aware of her bias towards people who sag their pants, ride in cars with rims, and listen to gangster rap music, then she can recognize that people who have those characteristics and having the officer realize that stereotypes are not always true. In these trainings, people are given different activities to help them understand their cultural biases, which allows them to accept that they have them but use that knowledge to help prevent themselves from judging people based on their preconceived notions. Another part of the training gives the individuals some knowledge about different cultures of people they may come into contact with. There are a few problems involving this training, the first of which being the uneven access for all departments. This means that some departments may not have the funds or time allotted to allow them to implement a program like this which can help with community relations. Another problem could be that the department may not feel like it has an issue with community relations or cultural issues.

Another way to help eliminate the problem is implementing an early warning system to help identify problem officers. An early warning system is a data driven program designed to
identify officers whose behaviors are problematic. The goal of this program is non-punitive in which the idea is to correct behavior versus just firing the officer. This is because the hiring of a new officer is expensive and time consuming. The guidelines follow the Miami model; the first guideline discusses complaints and if an officer has more than five in a two-year period then it sends up a red flag. In the same way as complaints, if an officer is reprimanded more than five times in a two-year period then a flag goes up. Following the previous guidelines of five or more times in a two-year period sending up a red flag is, control of a person using force. This encompasses everything on the use of force spectrum after soft-hands. The last guideline is the discharge of a firearm and the red flag goes up if the weapon is discharged three of more times in a five-year period. If any of the guidelines are broken then the department will try to understand why each incident occurred and offer assistance to the officer if needed. For example, if the reason an officer has received five complaints in the time allotted is because he is going through a divorce and turned to alcohol to help deal with the stress, then the department may send him to alcohol treatment instead of firing him.

Having a police liaison can also help with the public perception because it allows for a go between for the public and the police department: “The police liaison acts as a go between the people participating in the action and the police to ensure clear communication of demands, expectations, needs, responses, etc. This person plays a critical role in minimizing reckless behavior on the part of the police and helping to de-escalate situations that are moving out of control (or strategically escalate when necessary). A police liaison is NOT a negotiator but acts
as a mediator between the police department and the public. The police liaison is not usually empowered to “cut deals” or make compromises with the police. (Police Liaison) “

In addition to all of these steps for the police departments, there are also steps that the community can take to help them not only understand police officers but also alleviate the concerns they have regarding their community. The community can attend public meetings that the police departments set up to address the concerns the community is having. For example, if a citizen was worried about some strange people hanging around her street at night she can bring that concern up to the officers so they can become aware that there is an issue going on. Police officers may not know exactly what is going on in the individual communities so not only do these meetings help citizens in their ability to express their concerns but also police departments are now able to address the concerns because they know that the concerns exist and need to be addressed. These meetings also allow for police officers to be proactive versus reactive in dealing with the issues that come up in the different neighborhoods.

Another way to reduce the misconduct or the negative perception of police departments would involve having a civilian review board in place. A civilian review board or a civilian investigative panel has the authority to investigate police misconduct and determine if sanctions should be placed upon an officer. They can review police corruption like officers taking gratuities or kickbacks, or if an officer is extorting people or if they are ignoring illegal services like underage drinking. They can also review police abuse of authority, which can include perjury, brutality, drinking, sex to include voyeurism, non-contact sex, citizen initiated sex, etc. The sanctions are on a continuum ranging from the complaint being sustained or the officer not
having action taken against him or her. A program like this allows the public to have a sense of control over making sure that the police officers in their community are doing their jobs and not using their jobs for their own personal gain. If these citizen review boards are not in place then the community can lobby it so they are able to have a say in what happens to those officers.

Along with the steps that the community and police departments can take, there are also steps the media can take. Understanding the role that news media have in reporting the news surrounding what is going is important, but the media can help relieve the tension by showing some positive stories. The media can take steps to publish more stories depicting law enforcement in a positive light, to show that not every law enforcement officer is “bad”. For example, there was an officer in Huntington West Virginia, who bought gas for a mom who was stranded with her children (Searles); there was an officer in Jefferson County Alabama, who held a child who was scared after an accident (White). These types of stories will help to diminish the negative view that the public has for law enforcement. Not only can the media report positive news stories; they can also help with publishing the community concerns and the available resources that people can use to help solve those problems like a tip line or having the contact information for who an individual would need to talk to. The media can also be used to inform the people of new laws or rules that are being set in place. For example, when the new no texting and driving law came out in the state of Virginia the news stations reported it so that people would be informed about it and prevent themselves from getting a ticket or fine. The only issue that could come up would be the willingness of news outlets to participate in helping to decrease the perceptions that the general public has.
Education and knowledge are key. If people know what is going on, then they are able to make the changes that need to be made in order to relieve tension that has been created. As clichéd as this saying is, it is still true in terms of the focus of this paper: “knowledge is power.” In the case of Ferguson, if Americans had known all of the facts about what happened and that Michael Brown was not in “surrender mode” and that he was non-compliant to the officer, then the protests may not have been as extensive as they were. If the public knew everything that officers have to go through on a day-to-day basis while they are working and realize that they are people too, then the general public’s perception of law enforcement can change. Listed above are things that law enforcement, the media, and the public can do to help relieve the tension and help diminish the negative reputation that law enforcement has. The media can report some positive news stories, can wait until they have all of the information about a story before reporting on it but because of timeliness it is not a completely realistic recommendation. One way to combat the issue of timeliness would be if the paper or news report need to retract or changed, they could make sure that the public knows that the information has changed. Law enforcement can put in place early warning systems for problem officers, have mandatory cultural competency training for all officers, have community meetings and have a police liaison. The public can lobby for civilian review boards and attend the community meetings to discuss what is going on in their community. One thing to really stress is that the responsibility does not fall in one specific place but lies within various sectors. It is important to make these changes because if changes are not made then protests like the ones in Ferguson can become a common occurrence and tension will
only increase. If the tension increases then there is a lesser chance for change and resolution to occur.


