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Law Enforcement as a Career Choice Among Undergraduate Criminal Justice Students at Texas State University

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Walden University

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Jessie McMahon

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Walden University
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Abstract

Law Enforcement as a Career Choice Among Undergraduate Criminal Justice Students at

Texas State University

by

Jessie McMahon

MS, Bethel University, 2017

BS, University of Tennessee at Martin, 2015

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

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Abstract

The number of police officers in the United States is decreasing amid ongoing recruitment and retention issues. The low staffing levels compromise community and officer safety. Although criminal justice is a popular undergraduate college major, many graduates pursue other careers for reasons that are not fully understood. The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why some undergraduate criminal justice students are no longer interested in policing as a career choice. A phenomenological qualitative research design was used. The theoretical framework was rational choice theory. Eight undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who were no longer seriously considering a policing career were interviewed about their decision using convenience sampling. The interview questions centered on identifying what makes a law enforcement career unappealing and what changes law enforcement agencies can make to heighten appeal. The interviews were transcribed and coded into codes, categories, and themes. Though responses varied, increased salary and a better focus on community involvement by policing agencies emerged as key recommendations for encouraging criminal justice students to pursue a policing career. Using the study findings, law enforcement leaders may be able to improve the recruitment of new criminal justice graduates and increase the number of officers, which may foster positive social change by bolstering public safety.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Chief Mike Walker, who gave me my first opportunity in law enforcement. Chief Walker exhibits all the characteristics of a true peace officer, never failing to provide service to others above self. Chief taught me that the old adage of “protecting and serving” is actually backwards. Through service, we protect. By his example, I understand that decades of law enforcement experience need not harden a heart; rather, it can lead to developing kindness and empathy toward our fellow man.

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I am truly thankful for the assistance of my committee and my academic advisor throughout this dissertation process. These individuals have guided me, never losing patience. I am immensely grateful to my parents, Roy and Sandra McMahon, for instilling in me the importance of education and nurturing my love for academia. I am blessed that they were able to provide me with the means and environment to be successful in my youth. I am fortunate to have a sister like Breanna Wood, who has always been the first to cheer me on along any path I have chosen to take, especially this one. Most of all, I am thankful to my savior Jesus Christ for giving me the strength and comfort I needed to continue this journey through seasons of joy and hardship. If not for life's tribulations, perhaps this victory would not taste as sweet.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Between 2015 and 2018, the number of sworn law enforcement officers across the United States dropped from approximately 723,000 to 700,000 (Kaste, 2018). The specific reason for the drop is unknown. The shortage of officers has created a crisis, as fewer officers often means increased response times in emergency situations and a lack of backup for the remaining officers. A 2019 study by the Dallas Police Department revealed that, although the number of calls for service had decreased significantly in the previous 2 years, the response time was slower (Jaramillo, 2019). The leaders of the Dallas Police Department attributed this slower response time to the loss of hundreds of sworn law enforcement officers in recent years (Jaramillo, 2019). As the number of officers decreases, agencies are tasked with finding ways to keep patrol divisions staffed to an operational level. As recruitment techniques have failed, many law enforcement agencies have resorted to “poaching” experienced law enforcement officers from other jurisdictions (Kaste, 2018). However, it seems that this strategy has not increased the number of sworn law enforcement officers nationwide and is only a temporary solution for individual agencies.

The problems with recruitment and retention levels among U.S. law enforcement agencies is interesting considering the popularity of crime as a topic in the media as well as in academia. For example, as of 2016 criminal justice remained the sixth most popular undergraduate collegiate major in the United States despite the public’s apparent disinterest in law enforcement as a career choice overall (Tetzlaff, 2016). Newspapers,

web articles, and news broadcasts also feature gripping stories focused on the criminal justice system. Crime dramas remain one of the most popular forms of television entertainment (Wakeman, 2016), as evidenced by the popularity of *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, *NCIS*, *Bones*, *Blue Bloods*, and the like. Crime in entertainment media has been so widely viewed that a phenomenon dubbed “The CSI Effect” has been used to describe how crime-related entertainment media have led to the public’s expectation that physical evidence be presented in every trial for the jury to justify a guilty verdict (Trainum, 2019). Despite the entertainment media’s fascination with the criminal justice system, police recruitment and retention levels continue to be low in the United States. Little research exists, according to my review of the literature, to explain why so many individuals choose to major in criminal justice at the undergraduate level yet decide against a career in law enforcement despite their interest in the field. In this study, I attempted to fill this gap in the literature. Study findings may assist law enforcement leaders in devising strategies to boost recruitment and retention levels in law enforcement agencies.

Problem Statement

The declining number of law enforcement officers in the United States is one of the most pressing problems facing the criminal justice system today. Though criminal justice remains the sixth most popular undergraduate college major (Tetzlaff, 2016), the number of sworn law enforcement officers across the nation has decreased significantly (Kaste, 2018). This problem has negatively impacted society and the remaining law enforcement officers because, when fewer sworn officers are available in a given

jurisdiction, the response time to emergencies can suffer (see Jaramillo, 2019). Law enforcement agencies must stay adequately staffed so that members of the community can receive a quick response in time-sensitive emergencies, where minutes or even seconds can save lives. It would stand to reason that police officers themselves are also at heightened risk when back-up officers become scarcer as a result of the officer shortage.

Addressing issues affecting the recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers, especially those who graduated with a degree in criminal justice, is therefore critical. Furthermore, as studies have shown, police officers with 4-year degrees are more likely use verbal de-escalation techniques as opposed to physical force (Paoline & Terrill, n.d.). For this reason, it is even more important to determine why some college education criminal justice students are refraining from a career in policing. A possible cause of this problem is an increasing disinterest in policing as a career choice. A study investigating the reasons why many undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a law enforcement career through interviews could provide insight on how to address this situation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why some qualified policing candidates, specifically undergraduate criminal justice students, are disinterested in policing as a career choice. Many of these individuals are interested in a policing career at some point but subsequently change their minds. Criminal justice is a leading undergraduate major in the United States (Tetzlaff, 2016), but many college graduates

with this major pursue careers outside of law enforcement. This phenomenological qualitative study was necessary to fill a gap in the literature with rich, detailed data.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored why many undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a career in policing despite their interest in the criminal justice field itself. I sought to understand the reason or reasons these individuals do not want to pursue a career in law enforcement and what could be done to change their minds. Ultimately, this knowledge could help law enforcement strategies to devise policies that assist with the recruitment of these individuals. The research questions (RQs) were as follows:

RQ1. According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what makes a law enforcement career unappealing?

RQ2. According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what changes can law enforcement agencies make to heighten appeal?

Theoretical Foundation

For the theoretical framework of this study, I used rational choice theory. Rational choice theory holds that individuals make choices that will result in the greatest benefit with the least consequences according to their own personal preferences (Amadae, n.d.). In this study, I interviewed undergraduate criminal justice students in Texas who were no longer seriously considering policing as a career choice about their decision. In line with rational choice theory, the consequences of a policing career were identified. I asked the

participating students to explain what influenced them to decide against a career in policing; then, I examined how the participants came to this choice. From a rational choice theory perspective, the participants had weighed the benefits and consequences of a career in policing and determined that the consequences outweighed the potential benefits. With knowledge of these perceived consequences, law enforcement agency administrators may be able to make changes to increase the benefits of a career in policing while mitigating the consequences. If more college-educated individuals are encouraged to pursue a career in law enforcement, there may also be a reduction in the unnecessary use of police force.

Nature of the Study

I used a phenomenological qualitative research approach to collect detailed information regarding the reasons some criminal justice students choose to refrain from a career in criminal justice. As this study was exploratory in nature and involved the collection of detailed responses from open-ended questions, the qualitative method was most appropriate (see Center for Innovation, n.d.). I conducted a series of interviews over the telephone. Individual interviews were appropriate for this study because they allowed participants to give unique responses without influence from other participants. I planned to interview at least eight undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who were disinterested in policing as a career choice and had never been employed by a law enforcement. This number of participants was selected because research suggests that a range of 5 to 11 participants, with a median of eight participants, allows the interviewer to achieve 80% saturation (Namey et al., 2016).

To be eligible for the study, the participants should have at some point been considering a career in law enforcement but later changed their minds. I asked the research participants open-ended questions about why they decided to disregard law enforcement as a career choice. These responses were sorted into codes, categories, and themes to obtain a clear and concise representation of the data collected.

Definitions

Category: An overarching umbrella for the grouping of codes (“Qualitative Analysis,” n.d.).

Code: A basic unit of meaning (“Qualitative Analysis,” n.d.).

Phenomenological research: A type of qualitative research that is concerned with common experiences within a group (Creswell, 2013). The goal of phenomenological research is to determine the nature of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

Rational choice theory: A theory that holds that individuals make choices that will result in the greatest benefit with the least consequences according to their own personal preferences (Amadae, n.d.).

Theme: A description of the interrelationships within the data that is based on the codes and categories (“Qualitative Analysis,” n.d.).

Assumptions

I relied on the assumption that there are undergraduate criminal justice students at any given university, such as Texas State University, who have never previously been employed by a law enforcement agency and are disinterested in a career in law enforcement despite their interest in the criminal justice system itself. Based on this

assumption, I asked individuals who were majoring in criminal justice but said they were disinterested in a law enforcement career questions regarding their decision to not pursue a career in that field. I also assumed that the answers to these questions could be used by law enforcement administrators to address some of the factors that may be driving away otherwise qualified police recruit candidates..

Scope and Delimitations

I studied why some undergraduate criminal justice majors are disinterested in a career in law enforcement despite their interest in the criminal justice field itself. The population in this study was Texas State University students who were majoring in criminal justice but who indicated that they were disinterested in a career in law enforcement; participants also stated that they had never been employed by a law enforcement agency in the past. The participating students were interested in policing at one point but had since changed their minds. Excluded from the population were non-Texas State University students majoring in criminal justice who were disinterested in a policing career. Students who had previously been employed by one or more law enforcement agencies were also be excluded. These exclusions may affect the transferability of the study, as localized variables may affect students' attitudes towards policing. For example, students who are studying criminal justice in an area where a highly publicized incident of police brutality has recently occurred may have a different attitude toward law enforcement as a career compared to students who are studying criminal justice in an area where the police force is largely respected. In either scenario, rational choice theory is pertinent because students weigh the potential consequences and

benefits of a career in law enforcement in order to assist them in making the choice with the greatest potential benefit.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is that law enforcement administrators must use the information from this study to better recruit and retain quality police officers. If law enforcement administration fails to use the results to make changes, then this study will be unsuccessful in aiding the police officer shortage crisis in the United States. To mitigate this issue, police administration should be strongly encouraged to use the results of this study to make beneficial policy changes for the sake of officer safety and the safety of the community protected by the respective department.

One potential source of bias that could exist in this study is that I am a former police officer with knowledge of the benefits and consequences of working in the field of law enforcement. I used qualitative data analysis software to eliminate potential researcher bias in the formation of the codes, categories, and themes. I also had my dissertation committee review the study design to further ensure that personal bias did not interfere with its validity.

Potential issues also exist with the transferability and dependability of the study. Because the interviews took place within one state and could be collected from only eight individuals, it is difficult to assert that the study findings speak for all undergraduate criminal justice students who are disinterested in policing careers. To overcome this limitation, law enforcement administrators in other locations should use the results with the understanding that the reasons some undergraduate criminal justice students are

disinterested in a policing career could vary. I hope that the overarching conclusions drawn from this study are transferable to other jurisdictions.

Significance

Little research exists on the reasons why many undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a policing career despite their interest in the field of criminal justice itself. I undertook this study to address this gap in the literature and add to the body of knowledge on this topic. The results from this study could be used by law enforcement administrators to make changes to better attract qualified police recruit candidates. If law enforcement administrators are able to identify the reasons some undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in becoming law enforcement officers and then successfully alleviate some of these issues, the officer shortage crisis might be improved. Addressing the officer shortage may effect positive social change in a number of ways. When law enforcement agencies are fully staffed, I predict they will be better equipped to respond to emergencies within their respective communities in a timely manner, which could result in more lives being saved along with better protection of the health and property of society member. Fully staffed law enforcement agencies are likely better able to safely respond to dangerous situations, as agencies are able to dispatch the appropriate number of officers to high-intensity calls for service. Furthermore, if college-educated police recruit candidates apply to law enforcement positions in greater numbers, law enforcement agencies may be more likely to remain fully staffed with quality, dedicated individuals who have already shown the drive,

determination, and critical thinking skills that are necessary to complete an undergraduate college degree.

Summary

The law enforcement officer shortage in the United States is a social problem that affects every individual in the country. Law enforcement officers and agencies themselves are likely affected when there is not a sufficient number of officers on staff to provide a safe response to dangerous emergency situations. Residents of communities are also likely affected when the lack of police officers results in increased response times to potentially life or death situations. Even individuals who may never have the need to call police may be touched by this crisis if traffic is affected by a lack of police officers available to assist in motor vehicle crashes and traffic control.. Using a rational choice theoretical framework, I sought to identify the reasons undergraduate criminal justice students often refrain from a career in law enforcement. If these reasons can then be mitigated, college-educated individuals might apply to law enforcement agencies at a higher rate, potentially improving the staffing level of police departments as well as the quality of the officers on staff.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The decreasing number of law enforcement officers in the United States compromises the safety of the public and the law enforcement officers themselves. This decreasing number is despite the public's fascination with the criminal justice system and the popularity of criminal justice as a college major choice (see Tetzlaff, 2016). The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons many undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a policing career. The findings may clarify strategies to mitigate these issues and thus attract more qualified candidates to law enforcement agencies. Although various researchers have examined ways to improve law enforcement officer recruitment and retention, scant literature is available to suggest the specific reasons why undergraduate criminal justice students are often dissuaded from the field of policing. I sought to address this gap in the literature by conducting this investigation. In this chapter, I consider the findings of previous relevant studies. Before reviewing the literature, I describe the literature search strategy and theoretical framework for the study.

Literature Search Strategy

I used Walden University library databases and internet search engines to conduct a literature search. Terms and phrases including *police recruitment and retention*, *crime and society*, *police officer shortage*, and *criminal justice students* were used in the searches.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was rational choice theory. Rational choice theory holds that, when an individual is presented with a choice between a number of variables, they will make the choice that will yield the greatest personal benefit with the least consequence (Amadae, n.d.). This theoretical framework was appropriate for this study because the goal was to identify the reasons these undergraduate criminal justice students have made a certain choice, specifically the choice to refrain from a career in law enforcement. From a rational choice theory perspective, the reason that many undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a career in policing is that the potential consequences of becoming a law enforcement officer outweigh the potential benefits from their perspective.

Other researchers have used rational choice theory in a similar fashion. For example, in 2019 Ukrainian researchers studied the rationale for why criminals chose to commit crime. The researchers (Neissl et al., 2019) aimed to determine whether women and men differ in why they commit crimes. The researchers concluded that both men and women chose to commit crimes because the benefit of committing the act outweighed the potential sanction that could be imposed. Although the goal, focus, and participants were very different from this study, the way that rational choice theory was used is quite similar. The researchers used rational choice theory to determine whether committing a crime or series of crimes would be a beneficial choice by weighing the potential benefits against the possible consequences of committing the crime. Similarly, I explored whether undergraduate criminal justice students who decided against a career in policing had

come to this decision because they perceived that the potential benefits of becoming a law enforcement officer did not outweigh the potential consequences of such a career choice. In this study, I further examined how the media and salaries may have affected this choice and whether a higher salary level could sufficiently counter the perceived consequences in students' career decision-making.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

The number of law enforcement officers in the United States dropped from 723,000 to 700,000 between 2015 and 2018 (Kaste, 2018). This significant decrease is problematic for some reasons. First, according to a study conducted by the Dallas Police Department in 2019, the 2018 response times by Dallas Police Department officers were slower than the 2017 response times, despite the fact that there were 7,621 fewer calls for service in 2018 than in 2017 (Jaramillo, 2019). The Department undertook the investigation after Vittor Strausz Jardim called the Dallas Police Department three times within 1 hour after being struck in the face while trying to leave a soccer match (Jaramillo, 2019). Despite the fact that the victim sustained a broken jaw and broken teeth, police were slow to respond (Jaramillo, 2019). This incident raises the question of why Dallas police were able to respond more quickly to calls for service in years past, even though the current call volume is significantly lower. Alex Piquero, who is a criminology professor at the University of Texas at Dallas, stated that the understaffing of police departments is responsible for the poor response times and that this issue is common in cities nationwide (Jaramillo, 2019). This assertion is consistent with the fact

that the number of officers employed by the Dallas Police Department has declined by hundreds in recent years (Jaramillo, 2019).

A study by researchers Vidal and Kirchmaier (2018) also confirms that the likelihood that a victim will name a suspect and that an immediate arrest will be made increases significantly as police response time increases. The researchers suggested that police departments hire a “response officer” whose main responsibility is to respond to emergency calls for service immediately and begin gathering information until the assigned zone officers arrives; they estimated that having a response officer will benefit departments in terms of preventing future crime at a rate that is 170% of the officer’s payroll cost. It seems that if adequate police staffing results in higher police response times and higher police response times result in quicker offender arrests, then adequate police staffing is necessary for community safety. Additionally, adequate police staffing may need to be achieved before police departments will consider hiring a response officer to further benefit the community.

The massive decline in the number of police officers in the United States over the past decade is interesting considering that criminal justice and crime itself continue to fascinate the U.S. public. Television crime dramas remain one of the most popular forms of entertainment (Wakeman, 2016). Additionally, as of 2016, criminal justice remained the sixth most popular major for undergraduate college students (Tetzlaff, 2016). I explored the underlying reasons why policing has become an unpopular career choice for students despite their desire to major in criminal justice and the overall enthusiasm surrounding the issue of crime itself.

Stringer and Murphy (2020) polled a group of collegiate criminal justice students regarding why they chose criminal justice. The majority of the students reported that the availability of jobs was the reason they chose to become a collegiate criminal justice student. The researchers also asked the students to rank 18 common criminal justice jobs based off which one they felt was most attractive. Federal, state, and local law enforcement positions made up the top three most attractive law enforcement positions according to these criminal justice students. Lawyer was ranked as the 15th most attractive criminal justice job, and judge was ranked as the 16th most attractive criminal justice jobs according to these students. These findings suggest that criminal justice students are most attracted to law enforcement as a career choice, thus making the police staffing crisis even more curious.

Although it may be tempting to hypothesize that simple differences in personality may be accountable for an individual's decision to become a police officer or their decision to continue their career in law enforcement, a 2021 study suggests otherwise. Sanchez (2021) conducted the study in the southeastern United States. The researcher's object was to identify which personality type among state troopers is linked most strongly to the retention of their employment. Sanchez found that no personality type seemed to correlate with longer employment retention. Once personality differences are set aside, researchers must do further studies to determine the reasons why individuals seem to be deciding against policing careers.

It also seems that job satisfaction cannot be held responsible for the declining number of law enforcement officers in the United States. According to PayScale (n.d.), a

company which specializes in salary market data software, police officers have a 74% job satisfaction rate, and policing supervisors have an 85% job satisfaction rate. If these statistics are correct, the majority of law enforcement officers in the United States are satisfied with their career choice. According to one study, the factor most strongly connected with law enforcement job satisfaction is stress; the least stress a law enforcement officer endures, the greater level of job satisfaction that officer will have (Paoline & Gau, 2020). Perhaps, as aligns with rational choice theory, potential police recruits feel that the consequences of a policing career are simply not enough to outweigh the positive job satisfaction rate that seems to be experienced by law enforcement officers as a whole. Perhaps these potential recruits are drawn to careers with even higher levels of job satisfaction or to careers with other benefits which they deem more important than job satisfaction.

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) conducted a study in response to the 2018 workforce study by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence and Kronos, which found that the percentage of state and local governments which rated law enforcement positions as “hard to recruit” rose from only 3.3% in 2009 to 26.5% in 2018. The ICMA surveyed a number of government officials, administrators, officers, and community members to determine what attributes are most important to them in police officer recruitment (Young, 2019). Interestingly, possession of a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma was deemed most important, while military experience was deemed least important (Young, 2019). The ICMA also examined which priorities the respondents believe are most crucial for officers to apply

their focus. The top priority of the respondents was found to be “building community trust,” which was closely followed by “de-escalation” and “reducing violence” (Young, 2019).

Other researchers found that police officers with a college education are more likely to use de-escalation techniques than physical force (Paoline & Terrill, n.d.). It would seem that by attempting to recruit more college-educated police officers the community could achieve both goals outlined by the ICMA study (Young, 2019). Specifically, studies have shown that college-educated police officers are 40% less likely to use force (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010) and approximately 30% less likely to use their firearm in the line of duty (McElvain & Kposowa, 2008). These statistics raise the question of whether college-educated police officers are using an appropriate amount of force or shying away from force even when it is necessary for their own safety and the safety of the community. However, a study by Shjarback and White (2016) revealed that law enforcement officers with at least a 2-year college education are also less likely to be assaulted by a member of the public while performing their duties.

Although it seems more beneficial for police agencies to solely hire college-educated officers, these degrees do not come without a cost. The average cost for an in-state student to earn a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice was \$50,400 in Spring 2019 (GetEducated.com, n.d.). Some law enforcement agencies have begun providing tuition assistance to officers as an incentive to continue their education; however, this strategy also has its limitations. For example, some police departments offer this incentive but place crippling restrictions on the program in place. The Fairfield Police Department in

Fairfield, California, for instance, offers a tuition assistance program, but the maximum assistance an officer can receive per year is \$4,000 (Fairfield Police, n.d.). At an average cost per degree of \$50,400, an incentive of \$4,000 per year may be less than persuasive to college students.

Some other departments pay officers who have earned a bachelor's degree extra compensation. The San Marcos Police Department in San Marcos, Texas, pays police officers who hold a bachelor's degree an extra \$75 per month (San Marcos Police Department, n.d.). At \$75 per month, officers would have to work for the San Marcos Police Department for 56 years in order for this incentive to accumulate the \$50,400 needed, on average, to complete their degree. This is excluding any interest payments on student loans. Other programs commonly provide aid to officers who are presently pursuing their degree but not to those who have already earned their degree. This is case for the College for All Texans program, which provides assistance to Texas police officers only if they are still pursuing a bachelor's degree (College for All Texans, 2021).

Although the federal government has seemingly attempted to provide aid to public service workers, including police officers, who have accumulated student loans, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program may not be as useful as it appears on the surface. Over 147,000 people were denied forgiveness under this program between January and April of 2020, meaning that only around 1.5% of people who applied for forgiveness under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program were approved (Friedman, 2020). Individuals who are interested in a career in law enforcement may avoid obtaining a bachelor's degree at all, as careers associated with bachelor's degrees

in majors outside criminal justice often have higher starting salaries. Regardless of whether or not the officer held a bachelor's degree, the average law enforcement starting salary across the United States in 2020 was \$50,336 (ZipRecruiter, n.d.). Meanwhile, the average entry-level salary for an individual who had completed a bachelor's degree in engineering was \$69,188 (Doyle, 2020). An individual who is interested in a law enforcement career might thus reason, as aligns with rational choice theory, that a bachelor's degree in criminal justice is not a good investment considering the cost. After all, the same 4 years could be spent obtaining an engineering degree, which yields a notably higher starting salary.

Incidents such as the murder of George Floyd by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin (Barbot, 2020) and the death of Michael Brown at the hands of Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson (Wolfrom & Thebault, 2020) were highly publicized by a variety of media sources. Unrest, riots, and protests following these events were also highly covered by media outlets. Such coverage has included information on the movement to defund police departments nationwide (Loader, 2020). If police departments are defunded, the result could be a lack of proper equipment and training opportunities for the existing officers. Salaries for existing officers might also be cut as a result of defunding. The police department in Austin, Texas, devotes approximately half of its budget to personnel services, which includes categories such as officer salaries, training, and initiatives to address social problems within the city including homelessness (Vera Institute, 2020).

Media portrayals of police in recent years may have influenced some otherwise viable law enforcement officer recruits to choose a career outside of policing. In September 2020, two Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department deputies were shot in an ambush in Compton (Lewis & Power, 2020). A small group of protesters gathered outside the hospital where the deputies were transported (Lewis & Power, 2020). Hundreds of media sources nationwide picked up the story, and a wide array of false details were added, such as that the group of protesters was a large crowd, the group was blocking the entrance to the hospital, and the group was chanting "we hope they die" (para. 1) as the deputies were rushed into the emergency room (Lewis & Power, 2020). Exaggerated, or even fabricated, details could partially account for police agencies' tendency to give the media as little information as possible (Jones, n.d.). Media coverage may have the potential to dissuade individuals from becoming police officers.

Further, the media's portrayal of police may be partly responsible for some officers' choice to leave the profession as well. Potential recruits may make the rational choice that the potential benefits of a policing career are not worth the consequence of media scrutiny. According to a study conducted by researchers with the Pew Research Center, 81% of police officers who work at an agency with over 100 sworn officers feel that the media treats law enforcement unfairly (Gramlich & Parker, 2020). Forty-two percent of officers *strongly* believe that the media treats police unfairly, and of those 65% also say that the media's portrayal of police officers "nearly always" or "often" makes them feel frustrated (Gramlich & Parker, 2020). Conversely, it is possibly that the media's portrayal of police officers may have a differing effect on undergraduate college

students, as the Stringer and Murphy study found that a significant number of the criminal justice undergraduate students surveyed cited the recent increased exposure of the policing profession in the media as an influencing factor in their attraction to law enforcement careers (2020).

The dangerous nature of police work may be another reason why some undergraduate criminal justice students are choosing to refrain from a career in law enforcement. Police are often called to handle situations where life and limb are at stake, which inherently increases the danger of the occupation. According to the University of Delaware, policing is the 22nd most dangerous occupation in the United States (Facilities, Real Estate & Auxiliary Services, University of Delaware, 2020). The fatality rate for police officers is 14 per every 100,000 workers (Facilities, Real Estate & Auxiliary Services, University of Delaware, 2020). In 2018, 108 United States police officers were killed in the line of duty (*25 most dangerous jobs*, 2020). Being a law enforcement officer is 4.1 times more dangerous than the average U.S. career, and the most common cause of death for a police officer in the line of duty is death by another person (Facilities, Real Estate & Auxiliary Services, University of Delaware, 2020).

While police work remains among the most dangerous career in the United States, it seems that policing may not be as dangerous as it used to be. According to Florida Atlantic University, the rate at which United States police officers have been killed in the line of duty has dropped by 75% since 1970 (Galoustian, 2019). The rate at which police officers have been killed by others feloniously since 1970 has dropped by 80% (Galoustian, 2019). The only outlier in this data is in 2001 when over 70 law enforcement

officers were killed during the September 11th terrorist attacks (Galoustian, 2019). Despite evidence to the contrary, there is no evidence to suggest that there has been a “war on cops” since the death of Michael Brown in 2014. In fact, there were 1.6 fewer felonious police officer deaths per month in the months following Michael Brown’s death (Galoustian, 2019), though one might argue that this decrease could be attributed to heightened officer safety measures in anticipation of possible retaliation attempts on officers. Based on this evidence, perhaps it is more likely that the *perception* of increasing danger within the law enforcement career is more to blame for disinterest in the field of policing than empirical danger. If this is the case, we may be able to trace the root of this issue back once more to the media which may be responsible for spreading the false perception.

According to the Forbes Human Resources Panel (2020), the two factors that most contribute to whether or not an employee will remain with a workplace are whether or not they are valued by the company and how much they are paid. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the median weekly income for a United States resident in the second quarter of 2020 was \$1,005 (2020). Leading employment marketplace ZipRecruiter reports that the average weekly income for an entry-level police officer in the United States in 2020 was \$968 (ZipRecruiter, n.d.). Although the entry-level law enforcement income falls just shy of the national average, perhaps consideration should be given to the idea that law enforcement is not an average career. In 2020, policing was 4.1 times more dangerous than the average career in the United States (Facilities, Real Estate & Auxiliary Services, University of Delaware, 2020). Based off of these statistics,

it is possible that undergraduate college students may avoid a career in criminal justice because they believe that most other average paying career choices would be safer options than policing. Here, potential recruits may utilize rational choice theory in determining that a policing salary is not worth the average salary and potential bodily risk. In contrast, a study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* surveyed 300 New York Police Department (NYPD) officers concerning their motivation for entering law enforcement and found that salary was one of the least influential motivators, while job security was the top motivator for both male and female NYPD officers (White et al., 2010). An additional study that surveyed 131 police recruits also confirmed that job security was a top motivating factor driving the recruits toward a career in law enforcement (Foley et al., 2008).

Even if a below average salary for law enforcement officers is partially to blame for the decreasing number of sworn law enforcement officers nationwide, it may be difficult to convince policing agencies to increase officer salary considering that increased police officer salary does not seem to be linked to greater work output (Johnson, 2012). However, higher police officer salary does appear to be linked to a lower voluntary and involuntary turnover rate (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2018). With a lower turnover rate, policing agencies will be able to retain police officers for longer periods of time and thus may be able to maintain a staff that is more experienced overall. However, maintaining a more experienced police force does not come without its drawbacks, as one 1997 study indicates that rookie police officers are more likely to survive a life-threatening situation, withhold fire when appropriate, and fire accurate

shots when necessary, than their veteran counterparts (Ho, 1997). More experienced investigators may also be more likely than less experienced investigators to assign guilt to an interviewee even when the interviewee is answering interview questions with responses that are considered innocence indicators by the Behavior Analysis Interview protocol (Masip, Barba, & Herrero, 2012).

In a study published by *Policing: An International Journal*, the researchers attempted to identify why members of the general public may or may not be interested in a law enforcement career. The researchers administered an online survey to 344 individuals in the United States. The survey asked the respondents questions about how issues such as police culture, trust in the police, police practices, and awareness of policing opportunities affected their interest in policing as a career choice. The survey revealed that greater trust in police officers, more positive perceptions of fairness by police, and greater knowledge of policing opportunities were most strongly linked to higher interest in policing careers (Vermeer, 2020).

When the Civil Rights Act was passed, the number of female law enforcement officers began to increase steadily. In 1972, the number of women in law enforcement grew by 4.2%, (Reaves, 2015). This number further grew by 8.8% in 1986 and by 12.2% in 2013 (Reaves, 2015). However, the growth in the number of female officers in law enforcement has held steady at around 12% from 2013 to 2020 (Rossler et al., 2020). As women comprise approximately half of the United States population, it is important to understand the specific reasons why this plateau has occurred and the reasons why females tend to be disinterested in a law enforcement career. Female interest in law

enforcement is also crucial to this study, as research suggests that the presence of female officers tends to reduce the public's perception of corruption within the police department (Barnes et al., 2018). This is particularly important considering the ICMA study that determined that, in the eyes of the public, the top priority of police departments should be "building community trust" (Young, 2019). Some of these reasons may be transferable to female undergraduate college students who major in criminal justice but are disinterested in law enforcement as a career choice. One study was conducted across five university campuses and surveyed students concerning their perception of the barriers between women and policing careers. The study found that the female respondents reported having less respect for the police, less confidence in themselves physically and concerning completion of the police academy, greater "concern over exposure to less-lethal weapons," more concern about the balance between their work and life, less confidence in the potential for career mobility, and more "apprehension over competing for a patrol position" than their male counterparts (Rossler et al., 2020). Relevantly, these findings remained consistent for female students who were taking criminal justice-related courses (Rossler et al., 2020). These females seem to have made the rational choice that the potential benefits of a policing career are not worth becoming subject to these sources of apprehension.

Summary and Conclusions

The number of sworn law enforcement officers has decreased in recent years, and new officers seem to be difficult to recruit, despite the fact that criminal justice is a popular undergraduate major and the American people seem to be fascinated with crime

in general. College-educated police officers appear to have more of the characteristics that the public values in police officers than their non-college educated counterparts; however, law enforcement salaries may dissuade college-educated students from considering a career in policing. The benefits currently being offered to college-educated officers by both the federal government and individual police agencies may not be persuasive enough. Further, scrutiny of police by media outlets may also discourage potential law enforcement officers. In Chapter 2, the research method along with its design and rationale will be discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why some qualified policing candidates, specifically undergraduate criminal justice students, are disinterested in policing as a career choice. In this chapter, I will discuss the research design and rationale; the role of the researcher; and the methodology, including the participant selection logic, the instrumentation, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. I will also discuss potential issues of trustworthiness and the ethical procedures that I followed.

Research Design and Rationale

I sought to answer the following two RQs:

RQ1. According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what makes a law enforcement career unappealing?

RQ2. According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what changes can law enforcement agencies make to heighten appeal?

To answer the RQs, I used a phenomenological qualitative research design that was rooted in rational choice theory. A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study because I attempted to gather detailed responses from the research participants rather than concise survey responses. Use of a qualitative approach allowed me to gain some insights that might not have been possible if the participants were only asked “yes” or “no” questions or required to choose from a predetermined set of responses.

Role of the Researcher

I played a participant–observer role and was responsible for asking participants a set of predetermined, open-ended and relevant follow-up questions. I am not an undergraduate instructor and therefore do not expect any bias resulting from supervisory relationships to interfere with the research. However, I recognize that I am a professional in the field of criminal justice and may have biases toward the career choice or my own notions concerning why someone might or might not prefer to pursue a career in policing. To avoid influencing participant responses, I used a set of predetermined questions that I posed to each participant. I asked follow-up questions only when they were relevant to the conversation; in doing so, I sought to be nonbiased and not influence responses.

Methodology

Research suggests that a range of 5 to 11 participants, with a median of eight participants, allows a researcher conducting interviews to achieve 80% saturation (Namey et al., 2016). I planned to interview at least eight participants achieve high saturation. During telephone interviews, I asked the participants the following questions (see also Appendix A):

1. What motivated you to pursue a degree in criminal justice?
2. What career are you most likely to choose, and what brought you to this decision?
3. How would you describe your feelings concerning a possible career in policing?

4. How has the salary for a police officer affected your decision against a career in law enforcement?
5. What salary would it take for you to reconsider a career in law enforcement?
6. How has information released in the media affected your decision against a career in policing?

I asked follow-up questions only for the purpose of clarifying their statements.

Participant Selection Logic

I planned to interview at least eight individuals over the telephone. This number of participants would have allowed me to gather information from several different perspectives without compromising the efficiency of the study. Research suggests that a range of 5 to 11 participants, with a median of eight participants, allows the researcher to achieve 80% saturation when interviews are used (Namey et al., 2016). For this reason, I planned to interview at least eight participants.

Because this study is focusing on the reasons why many undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a career in policing, all of the interview participants were undergraduate college students who are majoring in criminal justice yet are no longer seriously considering a career as a law enforcement officer. These participants should have been interested in a law enforcement career at some point, but have changed their minds. None of the participants have ever worked for a law enforcement agency in the past, excluding ride-alongs and internships. An individual who has worked for a law enforcement agency in the past may have too much insight concerning the realities of policing, which might skew the study. Individuals who are familiar with the realities of

law enforcement work may have different reasons for avoiding a career in policing than the average undergraduate student. In order to ensure that the interview participants meet the criteria for participation, each prospective participant was emailed a preliminary questionnaire with the following questions:

1. Are you an undergraduate student who is majoring in criminal justice?
2. Have you ever worked full time for a law enforcement agency in the past?
This does not include ride-alongs or internships.
3. Have you ever considered a career in policing?
4. Are you seriously considering a career in policing at this time?

I used the distribution of fliers in public areas of San Marcos, Texas, and a public Facebook recruitment post to recruit participants.

Instrumentation

I conducted this study using interviews. One of the earliest recorded interviews was a job interview administered by Thomas Edison in 1921 (White, 2015). Interviews allow the research participants to speak freely within restraints imposed by the surveys. Interviews may allow researchers to gain information and insight that might not have been possible if the participants were limited to selecting answers from choices on a survey. Because I am trying to understand why the participants are not interested in a policing career despite their interest in the field of criminal justice, interviews are the appropriate form of instrumentation. Validity was established by including interview participants from a large university. However, as all the participants were from Texas State University, so it is possible that culture within the college in that area could affect

the results. The interviewees were asked a set of predetermined questions along with any relevant follow-up questions to clarify their statements. The interviews were audio-recorded. The audio recordings were used to transcribe each individual interview, and the transcriptions were then be organized into codes, categories, and themes.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The same procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection were followed for each of the RQs. I planned to collect data from at least eight undergraduate criminal justice students who are no longer seriously considering a career in policing and have never previously worked for a law enforcement agency. The data were collected from these individuals through telephone interviews. The interviews were scheduled based on interviewee availability and were around ten minutes long. Participants were recruited using fliers, a public Facebook recruitment post, and by speaking with people in public areas in San Marcos, Texas. I conducted the interviews and administered the questions and follow-up questions. The interviews were recorded. I used these recordings to transcribe the interviews and then organize the transcriptions into codes, categories, and themes. The debriefing procedure involved thanking the subjects for their participation, providing my contact information for any follow-up questions the participants may have, and reminding the participants of the purpose of the study. No follow-up interviews were necessary.

Data Analysis Plan

Data was collected regarding the participants' responses to the predetermined questions, which was administered during the interviews. I recorded the interviews, used

the recordings to transcribe the dialog, and subsequently broke the transcriptions down into codes, categories, and themes by identifying common elements within the transcriptions.

Each of the six main interview questions pertained to one or both of the RQs for this study. The first interview question was, “What motivated you to pursue a degree in criminal justice?” This question addresses both RQs, as it provides a baseline for the reasons for the participants’ interest in the field of criminal justice. The second interview question asked, “What career are you most likely to choose, and what brought you to this decision?” This question relates to both RQs as well, as it could provide insight on the positive aspects of other career choices that the participants may not feel are present in the field of law enforcement. The third interview question was, “How would you describe your feelings concerning a possible career in policing?” This interview question is related to RQ1, which was as follows: According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what makes a law enforcement career unappealing? The fourth interview question asked, “How has the factor of danger influenced your decision against a policing career?” This question also relates to RQ1. The fifth interview question, “How has the salary for a police officer affected your decision against a career in law enforcement?,” relates to RQ1 as well. The last question that pertains to RQ1 was Interview Question 7, “How has information released in the media affected your decision against a career in policing?”

Two interview questions relate to RQ2, which was as follows: According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested

in a law enforcement career, what changes can law enforcement agencies make to heighten appeal? The first is Interview Question 6, which was, “What salary would it take for you to reconsider a career in law enforcement?” The second is Interview Question 8, which was, “What specific changes would law enforcement agencies need to make for you to become interested in a policing career?”

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

By reaching out to Texas State University professors to recruit undergraduate criminal justice students who are no longer seriously considering a career in law enforcement, credibility is maintained by utilizing a form of member checking. This form of recruitment is likely to result in a group of participants who are all undergraduate criminal justice students. Reflexivity is also used to maintain credibility in this study, as I have acknowledged that I had a career in law enforcement and may hold personal biases regarding the benefits and disadvantages of becoming a police officer. I used qualitative analysis software in order to eliminate the potential for researcher bias in the formation of codes, categories, and themes from the interview transcriptions.

Transferability

I acknowledge that issues of transferability may exist, as the study included very few participants, all of whom are students at Texas State University. I attempted to minimize these issues by including a variety of participants rather than only using participants from one class or one professor. The issues being addressed in this study exist nationwide, and the results will likely be beneficial for any law enforcement agency;

however, I understand that these results are most relevant to law enforcement agencies in Texas. I also minimized issues of transferability by asking interview questions that could apply to any undergraduate criminal justice student and not only a Texas student.

Dependability

The dependability of this study was established through a type of audit trail. The interviews were recorded in their entirety and then transcribed. The transcriptions were used to create codes, categories, and themes before conclusions are drawn from the data. A reader will be able to see that the research is dependable by reviewing the original transcription and comparing it to the codes, categories, themes, and conclusions that I have drawn as a result of the initial data.

Confirmability

I attempted to maintain the confirmability of this research study using the process of reflexivity. I acknowledge that I have had a career in law enforcement, which could affect this research study in some ways. I recognize the potential for personal bias and strove to neutralize it by allowing the literature review to drive the research and by using a predetermined set of interview questions. Only follow-up questions that naturally arise during the interviews and are necessary for the sake of clarification were used to help maintain confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

I recruited undergraduate criminal justice students who are disinterested in policing careers by distributing fliers in the San Marcos, Texas, area, speaking to people in public location in the San Marcos, Texas area, and making a public Facebook

recruitment post to recruit criminal justice students who were once interested in a policing career but have changed their minds. Recruits were given a consent form to sign. This form included description of the purpose of the study, a disclaimer informing the participant that the entirety of the interview dialog was recorded and transcribed, and assurance that confidentiality will be protected by refraining from the use of any names or personal identifiers in the final study. The consent form also informed the participants that they will not receive any compensation for their participation and that, if at any time they choose to do so, they may refrain from responding to a question or discontinue the interview without any repercussion. All materials related to this research will be held for a minimum of 5 years. No materials containing participant names or personal information will be shared with any outside source.

I did not interview I know personally, and I have not attended Texas State University where recruitment took place. I do recognize that I have been a law enforcement officer and may have preconceived notions concerning the reasons why someone who majors in criminal justice may or may not pursue a career in policing. To mitigate possible bias or ethical concerns, I used a predetermined set of interview questions that were approved by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB 10-18-21-0912287). I only asked follow-up questions when they were necessary to clarify a participant's statements.

Summary

An array of issues arises due to the insufficient number of police officers in law enforcement agencies. The purpose of this study is to address the decreasing number of

sworn law enforcement officers nationwide by attempting to identify the reasons why some qualified policing candidates, specifically undergraduate criminal justice students, are disinterested in policing as a career choice. A phenomenological qualitative study was conducted in order to fill this gap in the literature. Interviews were conducted with undergraduate criminal justice students who are no longer seriously considering policing as a career choice, using a pre-determined set of questions to determine what factors have led them to this decision.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why some undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in policing as a career choice. The RQs were as follows:

RQ1. According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what makes a law enforcement career unappealing?

RQ2. According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in a law enforcement career, what changes can law enforcement agencies make to heighten appeal?

In this chapter, I will discuss the research setting, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis and present the results.

Setting

I interviewed eight undergraduate criminal justice students who attend Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. The interviews were conducted over the phone. I conducted the interviews in my home office. The interviewees participated in the interviews in the setting of their choosing.

Demographics

For this study, I interviewed eight undergraduate criminal justice majors who attend Texas State University. This number of research participants is satisfactory because research suggests that a range of 5 to 11 participants, with a median of eight

participants, allows the researcher to achieve 80% saturation when interviews are used (Namey et al., 2016).

Data Collection

I interviewed eight participants for this study. Each participant was interviewed only one time. The interviews were conducted over the telephone. I recorded each interview using Audacity, a recording software. I used MaxQDA coding software to transcribe each interview so they could be emailed back to the participants for verification. I held eight successful interviews, which is within the range of interviews I planned to conduct. Due to IRB requirements, participants were recruited without contacting Texas State University professors and without visiting campus. Participants were recruited at public locations in San Marcos, Texas, and through public Facebook recruitment posts.

Data Analysis

I used MaxQDA to transcribe and subsequently code the participants' responses to the interview questions. Categories and themes were then drawn from the specific codes. There were no discrepant cases. Table 1 shows the codes, categories, and themes for each interview question.

Table 1*Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Interview question	Code	Category	Theme
1. What motivated you to pursue a career in criminal justice?	Helping people, working in various environments, shadowing shifts family, stories, crime shows, interest in law	Nature of the work, first-hand and second-hand experience, fascination	Participants are interested in criminal justice due to the nature of the field and due to their experience or perception of the field.
2. What career are you most likely to choose, and what brought you to that decision?	Forensic scientist, law career, investigations forensic psychologist, federal agency, teacher, victim advocate	Law, psychology, investigations, forensics, education, victim advocacy	Participants are drawn to a variety of criminal justice related career choices.
3. How would you describe your feelings toward a possible career in policing?	Indifferent, fine with it, not ideal choice, negative connotation, tough career, negative view of police held by everyone, people want to defund the police, don't think I would do it, wouldn't do it, never, not too sure where I see myself, possible	Indifference, unideal, a possibility	Although some participants would be somewhat satisfied with a policing career, it is not the ideal outcome for any of the participants.
4. How has the factor of danger influenced your decision against a policing career?	Is it really worth it?, unpredictability, definitely a problem, danger is associated with the position, could die in the line of duty, not ready to commit to the risk, a little bit, majorly, some areas are more dangerous than others, must do whatever is asked of you, none, definitely a lot, things are too crazy right now	Major influence, little influence, no influence	Danger is an influence on the decision not to pursue a career in law enforcement for most participants, though in varying degrees.

(table continues)

Interview question	Code	Category	Theme
5. How has the salary for a police officer affected your decision against a career in law enforcement?	It doesn't, the position is just not interesting, I like the salary, has not affected it, the salary is pretty good, police are paid next to nothing, police should be paid more	Has not affected it, has affected it	Participants have varying opinions on the law enforcement salary though many participants feel that the salary is satisfactory.
6. How has information released in the media affected your decision against a career in policing?	Biggest influence, hate toward policing, everyone is against law enforcement, want to be appreciated, don't want to be hated for what I do, don't want to be associated with negative, media wants to defund police, has not influenced it, I would behave differently than police in the media, negative stigma, negative backlash	Has affected it, has not affected it	Participants report negative connotation of police by the media, though have differing opinions on how the negativity affects their career choice.
7. What salary would it take for you to consider a career in policing?	\$75,000, \$60,000-70,000, no salary would change my mind, \$100,000, \$70,000-\$80,000	\$60,000-100,000, salary does not affect the decision	Though a \$60,000-100,000 salary may be persuasive, a salary increase will not persuade all criminal justice students to pursue policing.
8. What specific changes would law enforcement agencies need to make for you to consider a career in policing?	More training, more women, shorter hiring/training process, focus on rehabilitation, focus on helping the community, servitude attitude, higher salary, more incentives, better hours, become more trustworthy	Training changes, personnel changes, change in focus, salary and incentive changes	Participants have varying recommendations for increasing interest in policing, though many suggest a better focus on the community.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I originally planned to reach out to Texas State University professors to recruit undergraduate criminal justice students who are no longer seriously considering a career in law enforcement in order to increase credibility; however, this method of recruitment was disallowed by the IRB. Nonetheless, I was able to use Texas State University email addresses to send information such as consent forms and transcripts to the participants, meaning that all the participants are affiliated with the university. All participants identified themselves as undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who were not seriously considering a career in law enforcement. I practiced reflexivity to maintain credibility in this study to reduce the potential that my previous career in law enforcement may have introduced bias (e.g., regarding the benefits and disadvantages of becoming a police officer). I used qualitative analysis software to eliminate the potential for researcher bias in the formation of codes, categories, and themes from the interview transcriptions.

Transferability

Issues of transferability may exist, as the study included students only from Texas State University. The issues addressed in this study—namely, poor recruitment of police officers with a criminal justice degree—seems to exist nationwide, and the results therefore may be beneficial for other law enforcement agencies; however, I understand that the results are most relevant to law enforcement agencies in Texas. I sought to

minimize issues of transferability by asking interview questions that could apply to any undergraduate criminal justice student and not only a Texas student.

Dependability

I established the dependability of this study through a type of audit trail. The interviews were recorded in their entirety and then transcribed. I used the transcriptions to create codes, categories, and themes before drawing conclusions from the data. A reader will be able to see that the research is dependable by reviewing the original transcription (see Appendix B) and comparing it to the codes, categories, themes, and conclusions that I drew as a result of the initial data.

Confirmability

I attempted to maintain the confirmability of this research study using the process of reflexivity. I previously worked in law enforcement, which could affect this research study in some ways. To mitigate the potential for personal bias, I emphasized the literature review and sought to make that the basis for study. Also, I used a predetermined set of interview questions. Only follow-up questions that arose during the interviews and were necessary for the sake of clarification were used to help maintain confirmability.

Results

RQ1 was as follows: According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in law enforcement as a career choice, what makes a law enforcement career unappealing? According to the participants, there are a variety of reasons why they are not interested in a career in criminal justice. All eight participants acknowledged that they believe policing is negatively portrayed in the media.

Multiple participants stated that they do not want to be associated with the negative connotation of policing or hated for what they do (see Transcripts 1, 2, and 4). Appendix B contains the interview transcripts. Participant 2 stated that while they believe police officers are negatively portrayed in the media, it is not a contributing factor their decision to not pursue a career in policing because they would not conduct themselves like the police officers in the media. Opinions regarding police officer salary among the participants also varied. One participant stated that the police officer salary is far too low (see Transcript 1), two participants stated that it is satisfactory (see Transcripts 2 and 6), and the other five participants stated that the salary for a police officer is irrelevant to their decision against policing because policing is simply not interesting (see Transcripts 3 and 4). The participants who reported that a salary change would influence their decision regarding a career in policing reported a range of \$60,000-100,000 starting off would be required to gain their interest. Six of the eight participants acknowledged that danger influenced their decision against a career in policing. These two participants mentioned the possibility of dying in the line of duty as a law enforcement officer.

RQ2 was as follows: According to undergraduate criminal justice students at Texas State University who are not interested in law enforcement careers, what changes can law enforcement agencies make to heighten appeal? Participants reported that increased salary and incentives would increase interest in law enforcement as a career choice. Two participants reported that if law enforcement shifted its focus toward rehabilitating offenders and helping the community, they would be more likely to consider policing as a career choice. One participant stated that if more women were

employed by police agencies and involved in the hiring process, they would be more likely to consider policing as a career choice. Participants also recommended that there be better training for police officers, while also shortening the training or hiring process for police officers as well. A lengthy hiring process was cited as a deterrent for potential recruits. A participant recommended that policing agencies work on becoming more trustworthy to the public.

Summary

The undergraduate criminal justice students interviewed from Texas State University had varying opinions on why they have chosen to abstain from a career in policing. Many agree that police officer salary should increase, though two of the eight participants stated that no increase in salary would change their decision. Most of the participants agreed that the media has affected their decision against a career in policing. Most of the interviewees also agree that policing agencies would need to shift their focus toward community engagement in order to change their minds.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why some undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in policing as a career choice. This study was exploratory in nature. I used a qualitative design to obtain detailed responses from the participants. I conducted the study to address the issue of the decreasing number of sworn law enforcement officers in the United States (Kaste, 2018).

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study neither confirm nor disconfirm the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Several participants did agree that a greater salary for police officers would improve the likelihood that they would consider policing as a career choice. The salary they suggested for new police officers ranged from \$60,000 to \$75,000 per year, which is an increase from the average police officer salary discussed in Chapter 2. . The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the median weekly income for a United States resident in the second quarter of 2020 was \$1,005 (Forbes Magazine, 2020). This is \$52,260 per year. However, such an increase may not be unrealistic, especially if policing agencies have their funding cut. Furthermore, multiple participants also reported that the salary for a police officer did not affect their decision against a career in policing. All participants acknowledged that they felt that policing has a negative connotation in the media. Three participants agreed that they do not want to be associated with the negativity or hated for their career choice. Two participants, though disinterested in policing, stated that they did not want a desk job but preferred a job that involves a rapidly changing environment. Recommendations for increasing interest in policing as a career choice included

incorporating more women into the hiring process, instituting a quicker hiring process, providing better training, rebuilding the trust of the community, and offering a better salary. Multiple participants also recommended shifting the focus from arrests and prosecutions to helping and rehabilitating the community.

Limitations of the Study

I identified some of the reasons why some undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a policing career despite their interest in the criminal justice field itself. Law enforcement administrators may be able to use this information to develop strategies to better recruit and retain quality police officers. This is one of the main limitations of this study. If law enforcement administration fails to use the results to make changes, then this study will be unsuccessful in aiding the police officer shortage crisis in the United States. I believe that making beneficial policy changes is necessary for the sake of officer safety and the safety of the community protected by the respective department.

Potential issues also exist with the transferability and dependability of the study findings. Because the interviews took place within one state and with eight individuals, the findings may not be reflective of all undergraduate criminal justice students who are disinterested in policing careers. To overcome this limitation, law enforcement administrators in other locations may want to use the results with the understanding that the reasons some undergraduate criminal justice students are disinterested in a policing career could vary due to variables unique to specific locations. I believe, however, that the overarching conclusions drawn from this study may be transferable to other

jurisdictions because various participants were involved in the study from all walks of life.

Recommendations

To expand upon this study, I recommend that future researchers incorporate students from more than one university, as their IRB allows, to obtain more participants and therefore, more data. This may allow researchers to observe trends among participants and to assign weights to codes and categories within their data set. Participants in this study recommended that more women be included in the hiring process and within policing agencies as a way to increase interest in the policing career among undergraduate criminal justice students. As such, I also recommend a focus on the female population in subsequent studies.

Implications

This study, though it has its limitations, does have the potential to positively impact social change at the societal level. When police administrators are able to recognize the reasons why otherwise qualified policing candidates may be disinterested in working as a police officer, they may be able to change policies and procedures to attract more top candidates. Extreme policy changes may not be immediately within the reach of local agencies, but making small changes to increase officer safety, community awareness, and officer job satisfaction could be steps in the right direction according to the findings of this study. When police agencies are more adequately staffed by quality officers, it could mean that the community is kept safer overall and fewer incidents of unnecessary force occur. This study aligned well with rational choice theory, which holds

that an individual makes choices based on the greatest benefit and least consequence (Amadae, n.d); however, it is important to remember that individuals are unique and have their own preferences. A benefit to one person could be considered a drawback to another. I recommend that policing agencies use the results of this study to consider what positive policy changes can be made in their own department to attract and retain more qualified recruits.

Conclusion

The community is at risk when there are not enough police officers on staff to respond to emergencies. The community is also at risk when policing agencies are not staffed by the most qualified candidates. To increase the number of sworn law enforcement officers and to staff police agencies with top candidates, law enforcement administrators may find it useful to target undergraduate criminal justice students. Undergraduate college students may write better reports, become injured in the line of duty less often, and use less force while carrying out their duties (Paoline & Terrill, n.d.). The findings of this study reveal that better yet more expedited training, increased salary and benefits, and an improved focus on community involvement may be the keys to recruiting and retaining more policing candidates who hold criminal justice degrees. Doing so may promote a safer and more satisfied community overall.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to pursue a degree in criminal justice?
2. What career are you most likely to choose, and what brought you to this decision?
3. How would you describe your feelings concerning a possible career in policing?
4. How has the factor of danger influenced your decision against a policing career?
5. How has the salary for a police officer affected your decision against a career in law enforcement?
6. What salary would it take for you to reconsider a career in law enforcement?
7. How has information released in the media affected your decision against a career in policing?
8. What specific changes would law enforcement agencies need to make for you to become interested in a policing career?