Patrol career interest and perceptions of barriers among African-American criminal justice students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to evaluate whether black and African-American criminal justice students perceive barriers to a police patrol career differently than white students, and whether the perceptions of these barriers impact desire to enter a police patrol career.

Design/methodology/approach – The current inquiry uses a self-administered survey of over 630 undergraduate students in criminal justice classes across five public universities.

Findings – Findings suggest that African-American students differ significantly from white students in perceived social disapproval of patrol careers, respect for police and perceptions of whether the police engage in racial profiling. These perceptions display a significant indirect relationship indicating lower patrol career interest for black and African-American students compared to all other races.

Research limitations/implications – Research limitations of the current inquiry include the lack of a nationally representative sample, the use of four-year university students as a sample to represent the potential police patrol applicant pool, and the use of a survey instrument to gauge respondent beliefs about patrol careers as opposed to actions they would take in pursuit of a police career.

Practical implications – Findings from the current inquiry indicate that departments may need to focus more on improving global perceptions of the police and discussing the nature of the career with recruit social support structures. Police recruiters should focus on techniques such as addressing social isolation experienced by the police rather than on decreasing standards for background checks or simply increasing awareness of police careers.

Originality/value – The current inquiry is one of the first to explore perceptions of barriers to entering a patrol career among CJ students. It is also among the first to examine the impact these perceptions have on patrol career interest. The findings may also help criminal justice instructors more fully discuss these barriers with students of color.

Keywords Careers, Barriers, Police, Patrol, Recruitment, Race

The exigency of discussion surrounding the relationship police share with communities of color in the USA has reached a level not seen since perhaps the Civil Rights Movement. Numerous high-profile incidents and the civic response to these events have been shared on various media platforms, placing tension between the police and the public on the wider national consciousness. As part of this discussion, President Barack Obama commissioned the Task Force on 21st Century Policing in an attempt to build partnerships, increase public trust in the police, and reduce crime. Among the task force’s many recommendations for improving police legitimacy was to establish a concerted effort to recruit and retain officers.
who better reflect the communities they serve (Gupta and Yang, 2016; Ramsey and Robinson, 2015). Similarly, the UK’s Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) highlights that in addition to improving police education and training, workforce diversity is globally viewed as a pathway to a more professional and legitimate police institution.

Police legitimacy and a diverse police force are often seen as complimentary interests, where diversity improves legitimacy and legitimacy improves success in recruiting for diversity. Two important concepts that define police legitimacy are shared-values and lawfulness. The message becomes clear that laws must come from a shared value system, and be enforced in a manner that is acceptable to those being policed (Tankebe, 2013). Police agencies that are racially representative of the communities they police may help to reduce racial bias or the perceptions of racial bias (Fridell and Scott, 2005), and thereby increase police legitimacy in those communities. Clearly, to increase the representativeness of their agency as a pathway to legitimacy, departments must have success recruiting officers of color.

Recruiting officers of color is certainly not a new challenge to police leadership, and previous research has identified many barriers to the successful hiring and retention of nonwhite officers including a lack of trust and respect for the police, direct or vicarious experiences with negative police practices, a lack of awareness of opportunities and selection criteria that disproportionately screen out applicants from underrepresented communities (Gupta and Yang, 2016; Kringen and Kringen, 2014; Matthies et al., 2012; Perrott, 1999). Despite the identification of these barriers, and an ostensible desire among departments and communities alike to recruit more police officers of color, the representation of black and African-American officers has only increased from 9 to 12 percent since 1985 (Reaves, 2015). Coupled with this lack of recruiting success, little research has directly examined the impact of these potential barriers on interest in police careers. Fewer still are studies examining this relationship among people who express a specific interest in criminal justice occupations.

Drawing upon a sample of over 630 undergraduate students in criminal justice courses across five US universities, the current inquiry compares the perception of commonly identified barriers to recruiting officers of color (i.e. social approval of a police career, respect for the police, awareness of police career opportunities, personal background issues and perception of operational practices) between students of color and white students. Subsequently, the current inquiry explores what impact these perceptions have on black and African-American criminal justice students’ interest in pursuing a police patrol career. Suggestions for future research and policy implications are also offered.

**Literature review**

Since the emergence of the first post-industrial police agencies, policing has largely been a career field dominated by white males (Martin, 1980). Improvements in the representation of female and ethnic minority officers have increased over the past three decades (Reaves, 2015), but recruitment, selection, hiring and retention of nonwhite officers still remains a challenge for many departments (Orrick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2010). This is especially true for black and African-American officers, who remain significantly underrepresented in sworn police positions (Reaves, 2015).

The rationale for improving diversity through recruitment is appealing, and has historical roots in the post-civil rights struggle to establish equity among civil service occupations in the USA. One potential benefit of a more representative police department is that it may help to ease tensions between communities of color and the police (Clairmont, 1991; Leighton, 1991; Skolnick and Bayley, 1986). Additionally, some researchers hypothesize increased diversity among police officers may reduce misconduct by reducing the likelihood of white male officers mistreating female and nonwhite citizens in the presence of fellow officers who are female or
ethnic minorities (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993). Other research indicates that increased representation may result in fairer outcomes for persons of color in police-citizen interactions, and ultimately produce more sensitive and empathetic officers (Home Office, 1999). Skolnick and Fyfe (1993, p. 241) argue that a diverse police force is less susceptible to “groupthink,” where officers of a singular gender and race reinforce their definitions of proper behavior during down time at work and socializing after hours. The then unified authority imposes the definitions of proper behavior onto a diverse citizenry, resulting in tension and resentment (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; see also Tankebe, 2013).

The potential benefits of increasing minority representation in police departments also extend to longer-term organizational changes. Increasing representation of African-Americans in police departments has been linked to an increase in police legitimacy (Ranganella and White, 2004; Scrivner, 2006), and to overcoming institutionalized racism that persists in many departments (Waters et al., 2007). Others argue that increasing African-American representation may make the implementation of community policing strategies more successful (Viverette, 2005). Black and Latino officers have also shown more favorable attitudes toward community policing generally (Gau and Paoline, 2017; Paoline et al., 2015). At the management level, a more ethnically diverse police workforce may foster managerial strategies and policies which respond to both changing external (such as service delivery) and internal (such as increased training for professionalization) needs (NPCC/APCC, 2017), as anticipated in the PEQF standards supported by the College of Policing in the UK. Further diversifying the field for promotions and advancement may additionally serve police needs in reflecting a more pluralistic society and community at large (Tong, 2017). These potential benefits have substantially increased the pressures placed upon police departments to increase minority representation (McGreevy, 2006; Ranganella and White, 2004; Spielman, 2016), with some proponents of increasing minority representation going so far as to include requirements in federal consent decrees (McGrary, 2007).

Despite the pressures placed on police organizations, minority hiring still lags and the growth appears to be slowest among African-Americans (Reaves, 2015). The difficulties in hiring persons of color to police departments are often traced back to the early portions of the process, namely the recruitment, screening and initial training phases. This phenomenon can often be divided into two challenges: whether departments are experiencing difficulty in pulling-in recruits, or are screening out recruits of color. As an example of screening out recruits, recently the Chicago Police Department (CPD) developed an applicant pool that was approximately 71 percent minority (a contemporarily positive example of pulling in nonwhite recruits). Unfortunately, CPD has been hiring white recruits at a higher pace due to the tendency for their hiring process to screen out persons of color (Farr, 2018). The policy dynamic of selecting in applicants vs screening out, historically a source of contention in the police candidate selection process as it pertained to recruitment of females, appears to have a similar impact when considering applicants of color (Scrivner, 2006; Wilson et al., 2010).

**Barriers to minority recruitment**

Previous research has identified some common barriers that can be identified as issues related to ineffectively attracting recruits of color. Many nonwhite recruits choose to stay away from the occupation because they view police departments and officers as racist, or have had previous negative contacts with the police. A great deal of previous research has identified the tensions that exist between communities of color and the police (Brunson, 2007; Chevigny, 1969; Skolnick, 1969), and research has consistently shown that blacks express less favorable views toward the police than whites (Decker, 1985; Smith et al., 1991; Weitzer and Tuch, 1999).
According to Waters et al. (2007), the way police are portrayed in the news and entertainment media, the expectation of race-related harassment in the workplace, and previous experiences interacting with the police were mentioned by nearly half of all ethnic minorities interviewed in a UK study exploring barriers to minority recruitment. Similarly, Perrott (1999, p. 344) surveyed Canadian applicants at a minority-focused recruitment drive, and “prejudice at the police-community level” and “societal racism” were the most commonly selected top obstacles to joining a police force. Conversely, Kaminski (1993) found that while black high school students were more likely to believe that the police treat minorities unfairly, the perception of unfair treatment was not a predictor of whether the students would accept a hypothetical job offer to become a police officer. When it came to neighborhood perceptions, black students who perceived the level of community respect for police officers was low, were significantly less likely to accept a hypothetical job offer.

Racist and discriminatory behaviors among those who would be their coworkers have also been identified as a barrier to recruiting minority officers (Holdaway, 1991). The police culture and subculture has frequently been identified as a place where racial epithets and jokes have routinely been part of “water cooler” discussion (Chan, 1996; Holdaway, 1983; Wilson et al., 1984), or in discussions while on duty related to incidents of excessive force (Christopher Commission, 1991). More recent findings continue to support the contention that many ethnic minorities avoid policing careers because they will face discrimination from their coworkers (Waters et al., 2007).

A closely related barrier is that potential recruits may have family and friends opposed to the idea of them pursuing a policing career, or find traditional police work counterintuitive to their identity (Perrott, 1999; Waters et al., 2007). Waters et al. (2007) documented numerous instances of individuals who indicated their family and friends had expressed open hostility to them pursuing a police career. One respondent even indicated that they used to express an interest in a police career as a joke in order to get a rise out of their mother (Waters et al., 2007). Others took a more serious tone, indicating that a police career could result in social isolation, and that while ethnic minority groups needed additional representation in police departments, they feared a perception that they would be discriminating against their own ethnic group (Waters et al., 2007). Similarly, Perrott (1999) found that disapproval from within the ethnic community was toward the middle of listed obstacles to joining a department. In his survey of public high school seniors in Albany, NY, Kaminski (1993) found that if black students thought their parents would disagree with them becoming a police officer, they were over four and a half times as likely to decline a hypothetical job offer than those who thought their parents would agree. White students were just under three times as likely to decline, but the differences in the coefficients between white and black students were not significant, indicating parental support was not specific to one race or another (Kaminski, 1993).

Additionally, persons of color are also believed to lack awareness of the breadth of police career opportunities, and the mentorship structure with regard to entering a career in policing. This is potentially due to the existing lack of diversity in policing. Some have suggested that police departments have not placed enough emphasis in recruiting from the proper demographic areas, resulting in minority communities that are unaware of the careers available (Matthies et al., 2012). While this may be part of the equation, Perrott (1999) found that many recruits mentioned that there was a lack of police role models available to people of color. Research directly examining the hiring of minorities by police departments indicates that recruitment efforts targeting minorities increase the number of minority hires (Jordan et al., 2009). This offers considerable support to the argument that awareness of opportunities could be a barrier to hiring of officers of color.

Other barriers are better conceptualized as those that screen recruits of color out. For example, previous research has identified that nonwhite recruits may struggle with criminal
history or credit score issues related to poverty and marginalization (Matthies et al., 2012). Law enforcement agencies typically conduct extremely thorough background checks (98 percent use criminal records checks and 97 percent conduct a thorough background investigation), with any police contact being potentially problematic for entry into the field (Matthies et al., 2012; Walker and Katz, 2012). In their examination of a major metropolitan police department in the Southwest, Kringen and Kringen (2014) found that the background check phase of the application process represented a significant barrier to the hiring of black officers, with both the criminal and financial aspects of the background check representing significant barriers.

Current inquiry
Despite the obvious challenges in recruiting persons of color for police patrol careers, and then successfully ushering them through the selection process to the offer of a position, little research has systematically explored whether the nonwhite potential applicant pool perceives these challenges differently than do their white counterparts. Studies that have explored these attitudes in a meaningful way are over 25 years old, and are therefore more proximate in time to the era of the Rodney King beating than the contemporary challenges following the killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown.

Drawing upon a survey of students in criminal justice classes in universities in the USA, the current inquiry examines whether student race impacts perceptions of the pulling in and screening out barriers to entry into a police career. For barriers defined as issues related to pulling in recruits, the current inquiry asks students whether social support persons (i.e. parents, friends, significant other) would support them entering a police patrol career, whether they believed the police are worthy of respect, whether they had awareness of police career opportunities and whether they thought the police engaged in racial profiling. Students were also asked questions related to the screening out process in a police patrol career. Students reported the degree to which they thought a criminal background and personal history check would hurt their police career chances.

Building upon these initial models, perceived barriers that displayed a significant relationship to students who identify as African-American were explored to determine whether they influence desire to enter a police patrol career. Thus, the current inquiry will evaluate whether differences in perceived barriers may enhance or diminish the desire of African-American students in four-year institutions to enter a police patrol career.

Methodology
The data for the current research are drawn from the investigating potential candidates’ interest in police patrol careers study, a comprehensive survey examination of undergraduate student’s perceptions of police and patrol officer careers from recruitment to career advancement. Data were collected from a survey of students enrolled in criminal justice courses across five public universities in the USA, which included The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) (School of Criminal Justice); Illinois State University (ISU) (Department of Criminal Justice Sciences); University of Massachusetts-Lowell (School of Criminology and Justice Studies); Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (School of Public and Environmental Affairs); and Missouri State University (MSU) (Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology).

The academic units selected displayed variation in geographic locations (i.e. South, Midwest and Northeast), average university size (14,500–30,000), and major offerings (e.g. SPEA offers many managerial and public safety majors). Each academic unit also had a substantive proportion of students who would actually express interest in a police patrol career[1]. These similarities likely increase the internal validity of our sampling process, but limit external
validity to other areas (e.g. two-year community colleges, private universities, students not taking criminal justice courses).

The comparative character of the five universities reveals some similarities and differences in terms of student diversity, university size, and program offerings. The most diverse was The USM, which was over 30 percent African-American and about 3 percent Latino (Table I). The least diverse was MSU, which was about 4 percent African-American and 3 percent Latino. ISU and the University of Massachusetts-Lowell (UMass-Lowell) had the highest percentage of Latino students, at 9.4 percent (Table I)[2]. USM was the smallest school studied, with about 15,000 students, and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis was the largest at over 30,000 students (Table I).

Survey design and administration
Project staff determined that the most cost-effective way to administer the survey was to spend one to two days on each campus and administer to as many courses as possible. A contact person in each academic unit engaged with other professors in that department to determine if they were willing to allow research staff into their classroom to administer the survey. After pre-testing the survey among a group of students attending summer classes at USM (who were not included in the sample), the survey was distributed to undergraduate students in class during the Fall Semester of 2017 or Spring of 2018. This typically occurred during the first 15 min of the class, or the last 15 min of class. A total of 39 of 102 (38.2 percent) seated class sections were visited, including a variety of courses ranging from Freshman introductory courses to Senior seminar or capstone classes. Unfortunately, it cannot be determined which students were enrolled in multiple or no sections. For these 39 total class sessions across five sites, no professors contacted for classroom survey distribution refused researcher access to their classrooms. Students who were in attendance were instructed not to take the survey again if they had taken it in a previous course session. The 105-item survey was self-administered and completed on paper. The data were then coded into SPSS by project staff. For students present in the classes, the response rate was 98.8 percent.

The contemporary career aspirations of individuals taking criminal justice courses at the college level has been of increasing interest to both police practitioners and criminal justice academic leadership in an era of declining interest in police careers (Orrick, 2008; Wilson et al., 2010). Of equal interest to scholars of career pathways and workforce management, as well as to police leaders and organizations such as the College of Policing in the UK who desire to market police careers to persons with higher academic credentials, is the level of knowledge of the career ladder shown by persons who may be interested in more specialized police roles such as investigator or supervisor. The current inquiry assessed the orientation of the college student potential applicant cohort toward entry-level police positions in order to make potential statements about the landscape of challenges faced by both police organizations and programs such as the PEQF in further professionalizing policing. By focusing survey questions on student interest in careers at the entry-level position of patrol, the current inquiry was able to ascertain the desire of potential applicants to embark upon the rigorous selection,
training and career ladder processes that may lead to future employment in positions that are of anecdotal interest to the potential applicant (e.g. detective, narcotics officer and supervisor).

**Dependent variables**
The dependent variables for the current analysis consist of student perceptions of barriers to entry into a police patrol career, and patrol career interest. We examine patrol career interest as function of race, perceived barriers and a host of relevant control variables. About 40 percent of students in criminal justice classes across the five study sites indicated that they would agree or strongly agree that they had an interest in a police patrol career.

**Perceived barriers**
The survey questions for the current inquiry were designed to measure particular perceptions of barriers specific to those identified in the previous literature. Research staff developed between 3 and 5 question groupings that could be combined into scales representing the underlying latent variables (see Table II). The scales are coded such that a higher score would represent a greater perception of the issue as a limitation to entering a patrol career. To examine the degree to which social approval ($\alpha = 0.795$) of entering a policing career represents a barrier to African-American students entering the police profession, three survey questions were used measured on a Likert type scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree), “My family would not approve of me becoming a police patrol officer” (reverse coded), “My friends would not approve of me becoming a police patrol officer” (reverse coded), “My spouse or significant other would not approve of me becoming a police patrol officer” (reverse coded)[3].

An additional barrier identified that may impact desire to enter a career in policing was the level of respect ($\alpha = 0.786$) individuals had for the police. To examine this latent variable, four questions were used, “I was raised to respect the police”; “Police work is a noble profession”; “The public should respect the police”; “Police work is an honest profession.” While students were not asked directly about interactions with the police, research indicates that perceptions of the police can be tied to personal and vicarious experiences, as well as generalized neighborhood influences (Brunson, 2007; Kirk and Papachristos, 2011).

Furthermore, awareness of police career opportunities ($\alpha = 0.604$) has been identified as a barrier for students of color for entry into the profession. To examine this phenomenon, the following three questions were combined into a scale: “I want to know more about police patrol careers, but I have never been able to ask anyone about it” (reverse coded); “Having a mentor would make a difference in helping me choose a police patrol career” (reverse coded); “I have never had an opportunity to figure out what a police patrol career is really like” (reverse coded).

An additional barrier that has been identified for potential recruits of color is criminal and personal background checks. To examine whether background and personal history ($\alpha = 0.675$) would impact their entry into a police patrol career, the following five questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social approval</td>
<td>3–15</td>
<td>6.71</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>0.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>4–20</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>3–15</td>
<td>9.65</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>0.604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>5–25</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Profiling</td>
<td>0–1</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Descriptive statistics for perceived barrier measures
were employed: “My past drug use would hurt my chances at being a patrol officer” (reverse coded); “My personal criminal history would hurt my chances at ever being a patrol officer” (reverse coded); “I am afraid what my references will say about me during my background investigation for a patrol position” (reverse coded); “I would be worried about taking a polygraph examination” (reverse coded); “What I have said on social media in the past would hurt my chances at ever being a patrol officer” (reverse coded). Finally, to measure the barrier indicating whether negative police practices would influence a police career, students were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “Police officers racially profile people.” This was coded as a “1” if the student agreed or strongly agreed that the police engage in racial profiling, and a “0” if the student strongly disagreed, disagreed, or did not agree or disagree. This measure is also related to police legitimacy (see Tankebe, 2013). For further information about the scales created to represent student attitudes about barriers to police patrol careers, please see Table II.

Independent variables
Of primary interest in the current inquiry is the influence of being African-American on perceptions of barriers to entering a police patrol career. Students were asked to write their ethnicity in a blank presented on the survey document. From these entries, project staff coded seven separate designations consistent with the race categories used by the US Census Bureau. The resulting categories produced three variables of interest: black/African American, Latino/Hispanic and other race (Table III). White/Caucasian alone served as the reference category. As shown in Table III, 15 percent of students identified as black or African-American, 7 percent identified as Latino and 7 percent identified as a race other than white, African-American, or Latino.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td>1 = Interested in a patrol career</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = All others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1 = Student black or African-American</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = All others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1 = Student Latino or Hispanic</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = All others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>1 = Not African-American, Latino/Hispanic, or White alone</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = African-American, Latino/Hispanic, or White alone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1 = 18-21; 2 = 22-25; 3 = 26-29; 4 = 30 or over</td>
<td>1.382</td>
<td>0.645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1 = Male; 0 = All other</td>
<td>0.480</td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>1 = Military experience; 0 = No military experience</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ major</td>
<td>1 = Criminal justice or Public safety major; 0 = All other</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>0.438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1 = Freshman, 0 = All others</td>
<td>0.204</td>
<td>0.403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>1 = Sophomore, 0 = All others</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>1 = Junior, 0 = All others</td>
<td>0.309</td>
<td>0.463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU</td>
<td>1 = Illinois State University; 0 = All others</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>0.339</td>
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<tr>
<td>UMass</td>
<td>1 = UMass-Lowell; 0 = All others</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>0.327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUPUI</td>
<td>1 = Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis</td>
<td>0.240</td>
<td>0.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = All others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSU</td>
<td>1 = Missouri State University</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = All others</td>
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</table>

Table III.
Descriptive statistics for career interest and independent variables

Note: n = 772
We also included age, gender, military experience, degree major, year in school and university as control variables. Policing is largely a male dominated field (Martin, 1980), and thus it is necessary to control for differences in patrol career interest amongst genders. Similarly, it is reasonable that students who are older or more advanced in school may show differences in their knowledge of patrol careers, as well as attitudes toward issues such as racial profiling. It was also important to control for the participant’s degree major. Paoline et al. (2015) found that only 50 percent of the officers involved in their study had majored in criminal justice, while the other 50 percent had majored in a variety of other fields. Similarly, Roberg (1978) found that approximately 50 percent of the college educated officers in his study had majored in criminal justice, with the other approximately 50 percent majoring in a variety of other fields. Because of the substantial number of those that enter police work that do not major in criminal justice, it was important to control for the type of college major. Further, students who are CJ majors have also been shown to have differing occupational attitudes from their counterparts once entering a patrol career (Paoline et al., 2015).

Finally, military experience was used as a control variable. In addition to military experience being a commonly included independent variable in empirical examinations of the police (Gau et al., 2013), military experience is a fairly common characteristic of those interested in police work. The number of recruits or officers that have a military background varies between departments, but Weichselbaum and Schwartzapfel (2017) reported that approximately 19 percent of all police officers nationwide had prior military experience, while Decker and Huckabee (1999) found that approximately 31 percent of successful applicants for the Indianapolis Police Department had prior military experience. Individuals with military experience also represent another group that has been specifically targeted for recruitment into police patrol careers, with some departments even offering application and employment incentives (BJA, 2011).

As shown in Table III, the sample was 48 percent male, about 9 percent of students had some military experience and 74 percent of students were criminal justice, criminology, or public safety majors. Students who double majored, with at least one of those majors being criminal justice, were coded as CJ majors. Additionally, four dummy variables were included for the university site, with USM serving as the reference category.

Findings and analyses

Perceptions of barriers
To evaluate the relationship between race and the perception of barriers to patrol career scales, four Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models were estimated. OLS regression is typically used for continuous variables, such as attitude scales with large ranges[4]. To examine the relationship between race and perceptions of racial profiling by the police, logistic regression was employed, as this measure was based upon a single survey question, and is coded as a dichotomous outcome variable.

As shown in Table IV, whether a student was African-American was a significant predictor of perceived social approval of entry into a patrol career ($\beta = 0.193, p \leq 0.001$). African-American students perceived significantly lower levels of approval for entry into a police patrol career from their parents, friends and significant others than did white students. While Latino students and students of other races also held a positive coefficient, neither of these effects was statistically significant, indicating that their perceptions of approval did not significantly differ from white students. In terms of the other independent variables, students with military experience ($\beta = -0.162, p \leq 0.001$) and criminal justice majors ($\beta = -0.114, p \leq 0.001$) indicated that their social support structures would express greater approval of a patrol career.

Being African-American was also a significant predictor of the level of respect for the police. As shown, African-American students viewed the police with greater disrespect than their white counterparts that ($\beta = 0.358, p \leq 0.000$). Essentially, the respect (or lack of)
African-American students have for the police represents a greater barrier (and thus a positive slope) than it does for white students. Students of a race other than black or Latino also rated respect as a greater barrier to police patrol careers ($\beta = 0.095, p \leq 0.05$). Additionally, CJ majors had greater respect for the police than other majors while other predictors were held constant, and students at ISU, UMass-Lowell, IUPUI and MSU all held lower levels of respect for the police than students at USM.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, African-American criminal justice students did not significantly differ from white students in the perception that access to knowledge about police careers was a barrier to their entry into a patrol position. Latino students ($\beta = 0.121, p \leq 0.01$) and students of other races ($\beta = 0.105, p \leq 0.01$) displayed a significant difference, and indicated that a lack of access to mentoring about patrol positions may represent a barrier to entry into policing. Freshmen, Sophomores and Juniors all indicated they had less awareness of police careers than Seniors, and students at IUPUI had a lower score on the perception of access as a barrier than students at USM.

In terms of the model for whether personal background issues would prevent entry into a police patrol career, the entire model was not statistically significant. This is important, as race is shown to not statistically differ in terms of perceptions of background issues as a barrier for students at four-year institutions.

We also estimated a logistic regression model for perceptions of racial profiling. As shown in Table V, African-American students were significantly more likely than white students to agree that the police engage in racial profiling ($OR = 8.964, p \leq 0.001$). Latino students ($OR = 2.977, p \leq 0.01$) and students of a race other than African-American or Latino ($OR = 2.498, p \leq 0.05$) were also statistically significantly more likely than white students to believe that the police engage in racial profiling. Three of the site control variables were also significant, with students at ISU ($OR = 3.353, p \leq 0.001$), UMass ($OR = 2.316, p \leq 0.01$) and MSU ($OR = 2.574, p \leq 0.001$) all indicating that they were more likely than students at USM to believe that the police engage in racial profiling.

**Desire to enter patrol**

The next step was to determine the degree to which race and perceptions of barriers to a patrol career influence the desire to enter into patrol. As shown in Table VI, four models...
were estimated, the first omitting perceived barriers, with each subsequent model including a barrier perception that was significantly related to whether a student identified as African-American (e.g., social approval, respect, racial profiling). As shown in the race only model, African-American students did not significantly differ from white students in their patrol career interest. Male students (OR = 2.816, \( p \leq 0.001 \)), students with military experience (OR = 2.453, \( p \leq 0.01 \)) and criminal justice majors (OR = 3.835, \( p \leq 0.001 \)) were all significantly more likely to express interest in a patrol career.

Table V. Logistic regression for perceptions of racial profiling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Race only (n = 631)</th>
<th>Social approval (n = 632)</th>
<th>Respect (n = 631)</th>
<th>Racial profiling (n = 632)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.817***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.785***</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profiling</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.395***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.885</td>
<td>1.243</td>
<td>1.718</td>
<td>1.425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1.500</td>
<td>1.555</td>
<td>1.685</td>
<td>1.931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0.820</td>
<td>0.771</td>
<td>1.048</td>
<td>0.974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.869</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>0.860</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.816***</td>
<td>2.758***</td>
<td>2.603***</td>
<td>2.712***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>2.453**</td>
<td>1.976*</td>
<td>2.313*</td>
<td>2.515**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ major</td>
<td>3.835***</td>
<td>3.638***</td>
<td>3.365***</td>
<td>3.577***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1.028</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td>0.923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>0.569</td>
<td>0.635</td>
<td>0.558</td>
<td>0.508*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>0.906</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.828</td>
<td>0.841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU</td>
<td>1.027</td>
<td>1.174</td>
<td>1.427</td>
<td>1.361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMass</td>
<td>1.039</td>
<td>0.935</td>
<td>1.232</td>
<td>1.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUPUI</td>
<td>1.053</td>
<td>1.101</td>
<td>1.271</td>
<td>1.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSU</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>1.181</td>
<td>1.269</td>
<td>1.279</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \chi^2 = 103.136, \text{ } p \leq 0.001 \)

\( \text{Pseudo } R^2 = 0.204 \)

Notes: \( *p \leq 0.05; **p \leq 0.01; ***p \leq 0.001 \)

Table VI. Logistic regression models for perception of barrier scales and patrol career interest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>DIU 431</th>
<th>Black 2.193***</th>
<th>Latino 1.091**</th>
<th>Other race 0.915*</th>
<th>Age −0.067</th>
<th>Male −0.182</th>
<th>Military −0.227</th>
<th>CJ major −0.439*</th>
<th>Freshman −0.431</th>
<th>Sophomore −0.509</th>
<th>Junior −0.150</th>
<th>ISU 1.210***</th>
<th>UMass 0.840**</th>
<th>IUPUI 0.345</th>
<th>MSU 0.946***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>2.193***</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>0.346</td>
<td>0.183</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>0.345</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>0.301</td>
<td>0.310</td>
<td>0.239</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>0.355</td>
<td>0.299</td>
<td>0.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>2.193***</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>0.346</td>
<td>0.183</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>0.345</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>0.301</td>
<td>0.310</td>
<td>0.239</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>0.355</td>
<td>0.299</td>
<td>0.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>8.964</td>
<td>2.977</td>
<td>2.498</td>
<td>0.935</td>
<td>0.935</td>
<td>0.935</td>
<td>0.797</td>
<td>0.645</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>0.601</td>
<td>0.531</td>
<td>3.353</td>
<td>2.316</td>
<td>1.412</td>
<td>2.574</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, the perceptions of barriers where African-American was a significant predictor were included. As perceptions of social approval (OR = 0.817, p ≤ 0.001), respect (OR = 0.785, p ≤ 0.001) and racial profiling (OR = 0.395, p ≤ 0.001) as barriers increased, the likelihood a student would express an interest in entering a patrol career decreased. Whether a student identified as African-American or white remained a non-significant predictor of patrol career interest.

**Indirect effects**

From the previous analyses, we have established that whether a student is African-American is a significant predictor of perceptions of social approval of a career in police patrol, respect for the police and perceptions of whether the police engage in racial profiling. Contrary to previous research and conventional wisdom, identifying as African-American did not display a significant (direct) relationship to interest in a police patrol career, but each of the aforementioned barriers displayed a negative relationship with patrol career interest. Due to the nature of these relationships, we explored whether a student identifying as African-American would display an indirect effect on interest in a patrol career through perceived barriers[5].

To examine whether significant indirect effects were present, indirect effects models were estimated using Mplus 7[6]. As shown in Figure 1, whether a student was African-American (compared to all other races) was associated with a significant increase in the perception that social approval would be a barrier to a patrol career ($b = 1.708, SE = 0.319$). Additionally, higher scores on the social approval barrier index were associated with a significantly lower interest in a patrol career ($b = −0.130, SE = 0.019$). While the direct effect was still not statistically significant ($b = 0.000, SE = 0.133$), the indirect effect between whether a student was African-American and patrol career interest via perceptions of social approval of entering a patrol career was significant ($b = −0.222, SE = 0.054$).

Similar effects were found for perceptions of respect for the police (Figure 2). African-Americans viewed the police with lower levels of respect, and thus being African-American increased the perception of respect as a barrier ($b = 2.360, SE = 0.295$). The lack of respect for police was again associated with a diminished interest in a patrol career ($b = −0.161, SE = 0.109$). Similarly, the direct effect was not significant, but a significant indirect effect was found, again indicating African-American students having a diminished desire to enter a patrol career due to diminished respect for the police ($b = −0.380, SE = 0.063$).

**Figure 1.** Indirect effects of race and perceptions of social approval on patrol career interest

**Figure 2.** Indirect effects of race and perceptions of respect for police on patrol career interest

**Notes:** *p ≤ 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001
Finally, the influence of whether the police are perceived to engage in racial profiling was examined as a predictor of entry into a police patrol career. Figure 3 displays that black and African-American students were significantly more likely to believe that the police engage in racial profiling. An increased perception that the police engage in racial profiling is significantly associated with a decreased interest in a patrol career. Again, while there is no significant direct effect between a student identifying as black or African-American and patrol career interest, a significant indirect effect is found, indicating that a student identifying as black or African-American is associated with decreased interest in a patrol career ($b = -0.252$, SE = 0.067).

**Discussion**

The current inquiry examined whether African-American undergraduate students in criminal justice courses have differing perceptions of issues that have commonly and contemporarily been viewed as barriers to entry into a police patrol careers than white students. Additionally, we added to the current literature by directly measuring the effect that these beliefs have on interest in a patrol career. Consistent with much of the previous research, our results showed that African-American students viewed their social support system as less approving of them entering policing, had lower levels of respect for the police, and were more likely to agree that the police engage in racial profiling than were white students. Notably, African-American students did not display any significant differences from white students in their perceived access to information about patrol career opportunities and mentoring, or the impact that their background (e.g. criminal history, drug use, social media profile) would have on their ability to enter policing as a career choice.

Some other enlightening findings were that Latino and Hispanic students, and students who were not white, African-American, or Latino were more likely than white students to indicate they were missing some opportunities to learn more about patrol careers (e.g. opportunities to ask questions, learn about patrol and mentoring). Students of other races also displayed lower levels of respect for the police than did white students. Latino students, and students who identified as a race other than African-American or Latino, were more likely to agree that the police engage in racial profiling than were white students.

Some other findings outside of the direct research question were also notable. While other relevant control variables were held constant, students who were CJ majors and those with military experience had a greater belief that their social support structures would approve of them entering policing as a career choice, and CJ majors had greater respect for the police than did other majors.

In terms of whether students expressed an interest in a police patrol career, no significant direct effects were found for any of the three variables examining students of color. This is somewhat surprising given the stagnation of African-American representation in American police departments (Reaves, 2015), and previous findings displaying a direct effect in research examining high school students (Kaminski, 1993). These results may be impacted to a certain extent given that the sample is limited to.
students enrolled in criminal justice courses, and that students in these courses could possibly have more interest in police careers. However, since not all students who enroll in criminal justice courses in college are necessarily majors in the field, interested in police careers, or even sharing the same reasons for studying criminal justice (some students may be enrolled in their criminal justice courses as a requirement of their chosen field of study), this remains an intriguing finding.

The current inquiry was able to build upon previous research examining perceptions of barriers to a policing career and police career interest. Like previous research (Kaminski, 1993), we found that parental agreement or approval (and in the case of the current inquiry friend and significant other approval) could significantly influence patrol career interest among African-American students. Additionally, by examining the indirect effects of barriers on patrol career interest among college students in criminal justice courses, we also found that respect for the police and perception of negative police practices (i.e. racial profiling) also produced diminished interest in police work. Our findings indicated that while no direct effects for race were evident, African-American students view their support structures as less approving of a policing career than white students, respect the police less, and more frequently view the police as engaging in negative practices. A significant indirect effect is found for African-American students having a diminished desire to enter a patrol career because of their perception of these three common barriers to entering the profession.

Support for legitimacy predictors
Our initial framing of this argument focused on the effects of pulling-in vs screening out, a discussion of which emerged decades ago with regard to the impact of these selection procedures on gender-related differences in police career interests. Applying this perspective to potential impacts on racial disparities in the police career applicant pool, the results are somewhat unclear. Social approval, respect for the police, and racial profiling would be pulling-in issues, and indeed there is some indication that police departments may struggle to attract black and African-American applicants because of these issues. Opposing this assumption, African-American students indicate that they have no significantly different perceptions about the ability to learn about patrol work and access mentoring compared to white students. On the screening out issue, African-American students display no significant differences in terms of their perceptions about what their background issues may play in entering a patrol career.

What explanation may fit these findings more accurately is the comparison between predictors that reflect perceived legitimacy of the police, and those that focus on awareness or background. The current inquiry shows that whether a student identified as African-American or white was significantly related to how they view the police, and their perceptions of potential social isolation (i.e. social approval of the career choice, respect for the police, negative police practices), while barriers viewed as more practical (i.e. awareness of the career and background problems) were not significantly related to whether a student was African-American.

One caveat to these explanations is for students of color who do not identify as black or African-American. Latino students and students of other races both indicated they had less access to knowledge about patrol careers (i.e. opportunity to ask questions about patrol careers, find out what patrol careers are really like and having a mentor) than did white students, and thus recruitment efforts targeting Latino students should reflect this trend. The evident influence of perceptions of social approval, respect and police practices over practical issues for African-Americans could be a partial explanation for why representation of Latino officers and other officers of color (despite a self-reported diminished awareness of opportunity) has improved at a faster rate than for African-Americans.
Limitations of current research
While this research does make a contribution to the current literature, it is not without limitation. One obvious limitation is that the data are not drawn from a nationally representative sample. It would be preferable for future research to have students randomly selected from all criminal justice programs in the USA, or at least a multi-stage cluster sample of criminal justice programs. The coordination of a project such as this would be optimal, but was not realistic given the challenges at hand, and we are extremely appreciative of our site contacts at each of the five study sites for the access and assistance we received.

A second limitation is that while we were able to achieve a diverse body of students with varying levels of interest in patrol, the students at four-year institutions are not reflective of the entire applicant pool for patrol positions. It is possible that students at four-year universities reflect the most qualified and informed applicant pool, and that a more encompassing sample would yield different results on perceptions of awareness and background barriers. Four-year university students are inundated with opportunities to talk to criminal justice practitioners, and likely have fewer background limitations than the population as a whole. Therefore, we recommend further research on these topics with a broader contingent that more accurately reflects the entire applicant pool for patrol positions.

A final identified limitation is that this is an examination of beliefs rather than action. The current inquiry cannot definitively say that students who express an interest in patrol work will enter the police profession, or those that indicate no desire or are unsure will not end up as police officers. Future research should examine whether the attitudes and beliefs about barriers to patrol work in college (or earlier) actually influence entry into patrol careers rather than intentions or interest.

Policy implications
While the current inquiry is a single study, and far from definitive, we do recognize some suggestions for policy, or at the very least some suggestions for the direction of pilot programs for recruitment of police officers of color. To attract African-American recruits, police departments should focus on improving perceptions of the police in black and African-American communities. However, the police may not be able to do this by themselves. Similar to community policing, the police should engage community members and forge community partnerships with various community groups, nonprofits or service organizations (COPS, 2014), and religious organizations (Fridell and Scott, 2005). These groups may prove to be invaluable in helping the police not only increase their legitimacy in the community, but also possibly help the police identify potential recruits. This is not an easy task, especially in communities where perceptions of the police are very negative, but departments must devote whatever resources are necessary for this task (Fridell and Scott, 2005).

Furthermore, police departments should not abandon recruitment strategies that attempt to place the police in a more positive light, but should find ways to do so even more effectively. Given the consistency of the influence that social support has displayed in choosing to enter a career in policing, departments should focus on ways to get the parents and significant others of potential recruits onboard, or at least to provide information about the career from a perspective of someone who has faced the challenges a potential recruit’s family finds troublesome. As previously stated, and because black and African-American students indicate that they may have access to mentoring, this activity could be entrusted to individuals who may act as mentors to potential recruits to go beyond the typical role of assisting applicants with navigation of the selection process to actually providing a realistic job preview in a broad fashion to the applicant’s family, friends and significant other.
Specifically, the relationship between predictors related to community-police relations and
career interest, and the lack of relationship between basic practical recruitment approaches
and career interest among African-American students, have implications for police recruitment
strategies in communities of color, especially in contexts where police legitimacy is potentially
reduced. Police departments seeking to attract applicants from diverse backgrounds
should consider recruitment strategies that accentuate the content of traditional recruitment
approaches (i.e. the specific realistic job preview a mentor may provide in attracting
a candidate, such as home visits or speaking to a candidate’s family and significant other)
as opposed to simply having a mentor available (i.e. placing African-American and black police
officers as the visible face of an agency’s recruitment practice). Respondents in the sample may
even be perceiving the availability of a mentor as a “token” individual in the recruitment effort
who, while present, is possibly missing an opportunity to address concerns of social support
groups and family who may be skeptical of police careers.

At least from our research, lowering background check standards and increasing
generalized knowledge about patrol careers will be a less effective strategy if departments
seek to increase African-American representation among patrol officers. In our sample, the
data show that police agencies are likely missing out on qualified African-American recruits
due predominately to their perceptions of the police, and the perceptions of their social circles.

Conversely, Latino students and students identifying as a race other than African-
American were significantly more likely than white students to indicate that they needed
more information about patrol work, or needed some form of mentoring. Therefore, in
communities of color that are not predominately African-American, increasing access and
outreach may in fact be the best route. Effective use of this strategy may explain why
representation of other ethnic minority groups in policing has increased, while African-
American representation has not.

Finally, these policy implications also illuminate current efforts (in the UK, through the
PEQF and elsewhere) to increase the recruitment and development of a more professional,
diverse workforce (NPCC/APCC, 2017). This renewed focus somewhat legitimizes the
current study’s approach of examining college students potentially contemplating careers in
criminal justice fields, especially policing, since it provides empirical evidence of the
professional orientation of the potential applicant cohort of interest. The PEQF framework,
embedded in the larger Policing Vision 2025, intends to increase entry-level qualifications
for potential police personnel to align the profession with more rigorous fields and
professions which require advanced educational qualifications (Peach and Clare, 2017).
These efforts, which include curriculum revisions, increased entry-level qualifications for
police and enhanced professional training for professional development, should be
augmented by a vigorous focus on attracting candidates who already envision themselves
as potential criminal justice professionals but may view policing as a career in which risks
outweigh potential professional rewards. Data from this study suggest that institutions
continue to fine-tune police recruitment efforts by providing sincere and meaningful
mentoring relationships, particularly with applicants of color, in order to supplement
traditional informational methods designed to attract applicants.

Notes
1. The authors believed that an examination of all university students would produce too small of a
proportion who may actually have an interest in policing, and thus an availability sample (see
Weaver et al., 2018) of criminal justice and akin academic units was used.
2. As one anonymous reviewer noted, a nationally representative sample would be preferable to an
availability sample of five universities. While we agree, we also note that convenience (and in this
case, availability) sampling is commonly used in exploratory studies, and additionally with the
examination of undergraduate criminal justice students (Craig and Piquero, 2016; Lambert et al., 2014;
It should also be noted that the racial/ethnic and gender distribution of our sample conforms closely to previous research utilizing both criminal justice majors and college students in general (Lambert et al., 2014; Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999; Mallicoat and Brown, 2008; Tontodonato, 2006).

3. Overall "Neither Agree nor Disagree" was selected by 17.5 percent of respondents for the family prompt, 18.3 percent for the friends prompt, and 29.7 percent for the spouse or significant other prompt, indicating that not having a spouse or significant other may have marginally impacted the overall score of about 10 percent of the sample. The scale had an $\alpha$ value of 0.795 when combined with the other two prompts, which indicates a high degree of reliability with the other two items that do not suffer from the potential measurement validity problem of respondents not being in a relationship.

4. Collinearity diagnostics were completed for all regression models. The highest Variance Inflation Factor value was 1.824, indicating that collinearity was likely not a concern (Chatterjee and Price, 1991).

5. The earliest mediation models, known as the causal steps approach, indicated that a significant direct effect must be present before a mediating effect is estimated. More contemporary approaches, such as outlined in Hayes (2009), indicate that indirect effects can be estimated even if a significant direct effect is not present.

6. In these models, career interest and racial profiling are represented as reverse coded ordinal variables.

References


Matthies, C.F., Keller, K.M. and Lim, N. (2012), Identifying Barriers to Diversity in Law Enforcement Agencies, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA.


Further reading

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