

The Public's Outlook on Police Officers

Original Work ~ ISM 2015-2016 ~ Forensic Psychiatry



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11th Grade Independent Study and Mentorship

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Introduction



PROPOSAL

This year, I have been pursuing the field of Forensic Psychiatry. Forensic Psychiatrists often times work with criminal patients, lawyers, jails and hospitals. However, I doubt jails or many lawyers would be willing or able to work with me. That is why I thought it would be interesting and reasonable to conduct a study involving the subject of law enforcement. With recent events causing a deterioration of police image and increase in negative views toward them, I want to find out at which age the hero view changes and for what reasons by surveying individuals from elementary school to adult ages. I would then compile the information in a comprehensive way to show the levels of like and dislike towards police officers over time.

First, I would start of by researching the subject extensively and by creating small summaries on different controversial police officer events. By doing this, I would be knowledgeable enough to question others about it. The research would also help shape the survey needed to collect information. To gather the data, I was thinking of creating different scripts for each age group in a manner that I would also have planned out follow up questions in response to a specific answer. I feel this way would be the most beneficial because not only would I be able to gather explanations instead of yes or no answers but I would also be able to factor in body language and facial expression. The other option would be creating a paper or online survey similar to the one's the school district gives us to learn about bullying and drug use in school. All though this would be easy to interpret and turn into data, it would not be as detailed or accurate because when given these types of surveys, most people fly through it to get it over with.

Once I figure out the exact way I will be gathering the information, I would need to find a way to survey different age groups. While I can easily collect information from older and high school aged individuals, it will be harder to collect data about the thoughts of younger people. Another important thing I will have to do when collecting information from kids would be collecting a consent form signed by their guardians. When collecting the information, I plan on collecting data from fifteen individuals of each age group. Since surveying people from ages 5-30 would be too many people, I plan on collecting data from age groups. For example, I would interview fifteen people for the age group of 8- 10 and another fifteen people from ages 11-13. The questions I ask would essentially be the same but worded differently depending on the age group to help individuals understand more easily. Some of the questions I plan to ask would be

the following: Do you know what police officers do? , What do you think about police officers?, and Do you watch the news often or hear about the news?. All these questions have a purpose. For example, asking about the news can help determine if that is the reason for varying views. A middle schooler who keeps themselves updated with current event would most probably be more aware about controversial police officer events which might influence them to dislike law enforcement.

After gathering the data, I would condense it into a timeline to see if thoughts and feelings towards police officers fluctuate and where it fluctuates and why. I think it would be interesting to see the different points of views of individuals as they grow and develop. To create this timeline, I would either create a scatter point graph or a bar graph that showed averages. The scatter point graph would look interesting because it could show where each person fell on the graph while a bar graph would just take averages in account. On the other hand though, a bar graph would be cleaner and easier to read and interpret. Another problem that a bar graph wouldn't have that a scatter point graph might have is the issue of how to represent data if two or more individuals of the same age group have the same exact level of opinion. To solve a issue like that, I would have to make the point a different color to indicate that it isn't just the opinion of one person but two. Overall, I believe that this study has great potential and would be very fascinating to explore. Do we just think that people like law enforcement less, or is it actually a reality? Are women in their mid 30s more likely to have a positive opinion about police officers? Are all teenagers more likely to dislike law enforcement because of their exposure to the news? That is what I set out to find out.

PURPOSE

The purpose of conducting research on this subject is to determine how the public views law enforcement and how much of their view is influenced by negative media coverage of police officers and law enforcement in general. It is my opinion that many individuals believe that the general public dislikes police enforcement. By conducting research, I would like to determine whether this belief is a misconception or reality. Furthermore, if this is a reality, I would like to find out when this change of attitude is triggered. By interviewing a wide array of ages, I would be able to determine where the shift occurs and possibly why. With different age groups being exposed to different media coverage, it would be simple to determine which media coverage is influential and causes the change.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As can be seen through various news reports, police brutality seems to be steadily increasing. Moreover, citizens of our country seem to get more passionate about the subject. To start off, what is police brutality? Police brutality can be defined as the deliberate use of excessive physical force by law enforcement. Additionally, police brutality can include psychological intimidation and verbal abuse. In the last few years, many movements have been started such as the infamous black lives matter movement. Unfortunate events such as Natasha McKenna's death have caused uproar in communities nationwide. McKenna was an individual with schizophrenia who passed away after being tasered by county deputies multiple times. Even statistics show a rise in police brutality although there is a severe lack of recent data. In fact, one news channel went as far to mention how "there is no national reporting requirement for such accusations; in fact, many places have laws to purposefully keep the details of misconduct investigations out of the public eye." Moreover, the UN Committee against Torture condemned police brutality and excessive use of force by law enforcement in the US, and highlighted the "frequent and recurrent police shootings or fatal pursuits of unarmed..individuals" in 2014. With an obvious rise in police brutality or the coverage of it in the media, I wanted to know if many people had negative views towards police officers or whether a negative public opinion was simply a misconception. I also wanted to learn more in depth details about the people's opinion.

HYPOTHESIS

My hypothesis was split up by age group to provide a more holistic approach to the topic. I divided the public into 6 age groups and then created a hypothesis for each one. I expected 5 to 11 year olds to view police officers as heroes and in a generally positive light. For the age group 12 to 14, I hypothesized that they wouldn't view them as heroes, but would still have a positive outlook. When it came to 15 to 18 year olds, I expected them to have negative views toward law enforcement with the recent increase in negative media coverage. Additionally, high school students are mature enough to understand situations while still being very impressionable. I had the same hypothesis with 19 to 29 year olds, the only difference being that they would be more negative and more willing to protest and take action. For the ages of 30 to 40 year olds, I expected them to be neutral with a tendency to be slightly positive. I thought this because many individuals at that age have children and have a tendency to be protective of their children. In their eyes, they would see police officers as individuals who helped keep their children safe. They had the same opinion about those who were 41 years and older.

KEY QUESTIONS

- 1) Do we just think that people dislike law enforcement, or is it actually reality?
- 2) Why exactly do different age groups have different point of views on this controversial subject?
- 3) What do people think about law enforcement's handling of individuals with mental illness in general?

INFORMATION COLLECTION PROCESS

I collected information and data through surveys. Initially, I attempted to utilize an electronic survey but I found myself dissatisfied with the results. I could not view the answers of an individual in relation to each other which concerned me. As a result, I quickly switched over to printing hard copies of the survey I created to collect data. The survey was filled out anonymously by a myriad of individuals of all ages and gender. By collecting the data I needed on paper, I was able to keep track of the answers of each person and could easily see the relationship between answers. Additionally, I kept all the papers and organized them into my portfolio. This allows those looking at my portfolio to see the journey through the original data. The survey started by asking general information such as age and gender. It then went on to ask specific questions with certain objectives in mind. The survey asked questions such as if the individual thought “people with mental disorders are dangerous.” Other questions that seemed random were also asked such as “how often do you read the news?” All these questions were geared with producing a specific type of information. Additionally, I made sure that there were no easy cop-out answer choices so that those taking the survey were required to take some sort of stance.

Original Work Survey 2015 - 2016
Shrinidhi Joshi - ISM - Forensic Psychiatry

What country do you reside in?

USA

What is your gender?

A. Female

B. Male

How old are you?

A. 5 to 11 years

D. 19 to 29 years

B. 12 to 14 years

E. 30 to 40 years

C. 15 to 18 years

F. 41+ years

People with mental illness are crazy or insane.

A. Strongly Disagree

C. Strongly Agree

B. Disagree

D. Agree

People with mental disorders are dangerous.

A. Strongly Disagree

C. Strongly Agree

B. Disagree

D. Agree

About what percentage of criminals have a mental illness?

A. 0 - 25%

C. 51 - 75%

B. 26 - 50%

D. 76 - 100%

What is one word you think of when you hear the word 'police'? Why?

Danger, because they are associated with crime.

Which adjective do you think describes law enforcement (the police) best?

A. Helpful

C. Keeps us safe

B. Unhelpful

D. Makes lots of mistakes

What do you feel about law enforcement?

A. Strongly Dislike

C. Strongly Like

B. Dislike

D. Like

What do you think others feel about the police?

A. Strongly Dislike

C. Strongly Like

SURVEY TEMPLATE

Original Work Survey 2015 - 2016 **Shrinidhi Joshi - ISM - Forensic Psychiatry**

What country do you reside in?

What is your gender?

- A. Female B. Male

How old are you?

- A. 5 to 11 years D. 19 to 29 years
B. 12 to 14 years E. 30 to 40 years
C. 15 to 18 years F. 41+ years

Q1 People with mental illness are crazy or insane.

- A. Strongly Disagree C. Strongly Agree
B. Disagree D. Agree

Q2 People with mental disorders are dangerous.

- A. Strongly Disagree C. Strongly Agree
B. Disagree D. Agree

Q3 About what percentage of criminals have a mental illness?

- A. 0 - 25% C. 51 - 75%
B. 26 - 50% D. 76 - 100%

Q4 What is one word you think of when you hear the word 'police'? Why?

Q5 Which adjective do you think describes law enforcement (the police) best?

- A. Helpful C. Keeps us safe
B. Unhelpful D. Makes lots of mistakes

Q6 What do you feel about law enforcement?

- A. Strongly Dislike C. Strongly Like

- B. Dislike D. Like

Q7 What do you think others feel about the police?

- A. Strongly Dislike C. Strongly Like
B. Dislike D. Like

Q8 How aggressive do you think the police is?

- A. Very Aggressive
B. Aggressive
C. Not Aggressive

Q9 How aggressive do you think others think the police is?

- A. Very Aggressive
B. Aggressive
C. Not Aggressive

Q10 How often do you read the news?

- A. Never C. Sometimes
B. Rarely D. Often

Q11 What do you think about law enforcement's role in the Ferguson protests?

- A. Very Aggressive C. Not Aggressive
B. Aggressive D. I don't know

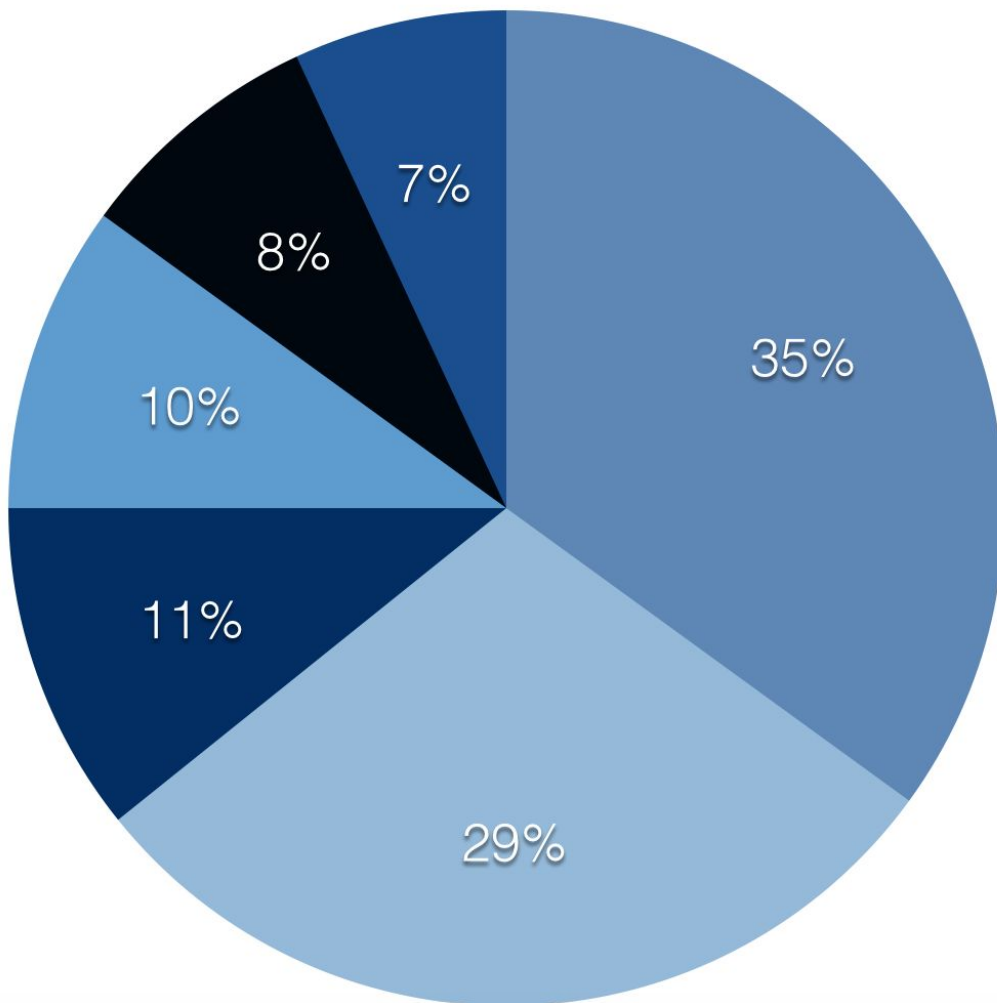
Q12 How high do you think police brutality is currently?

- A. High
B. Moderate
C. Low

Q13 Do you think police brutality issues will increase or decrease?

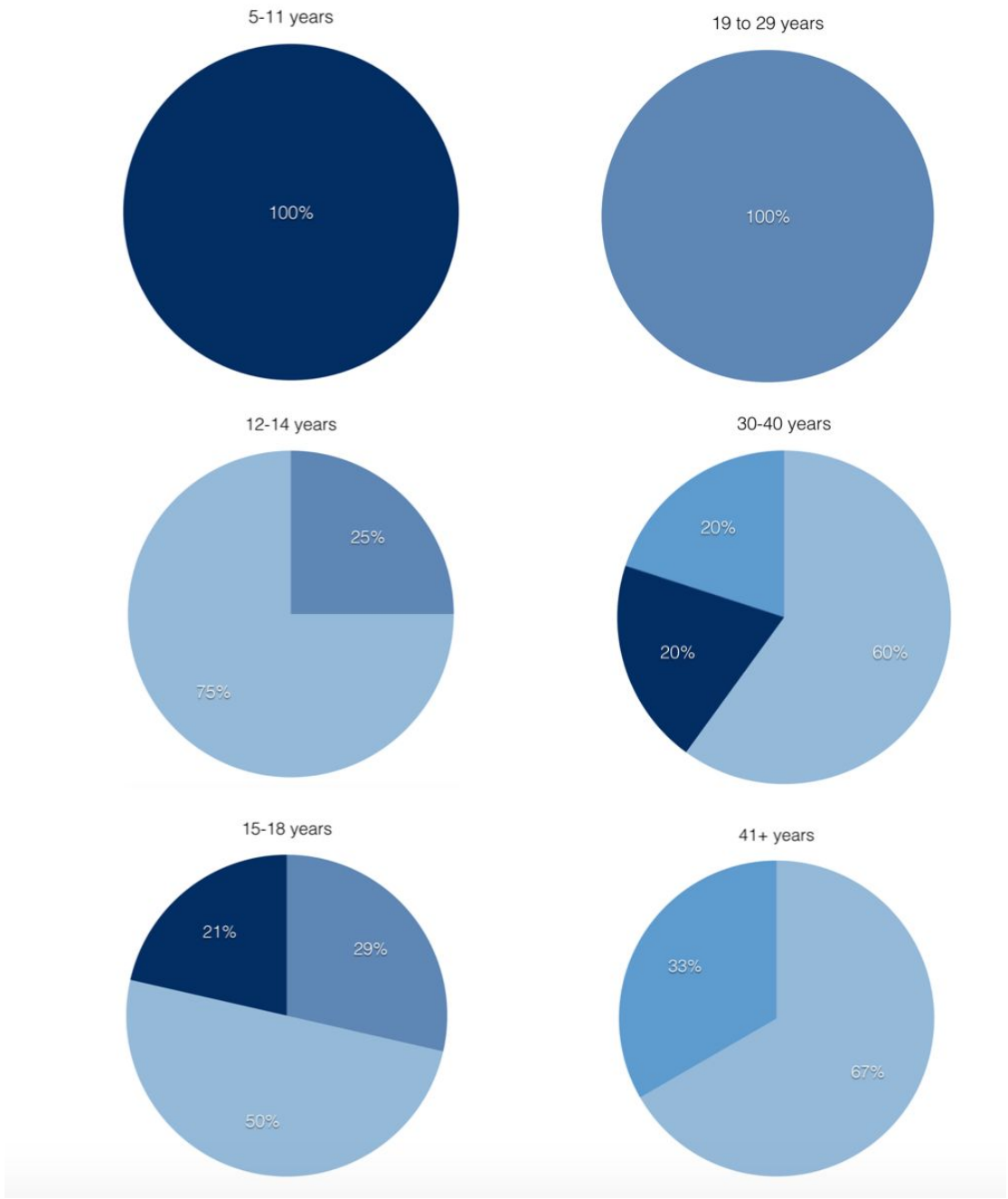
- A. Increase
B. Decrease

Data and Results



People with Mental Illness are crazy or insane.

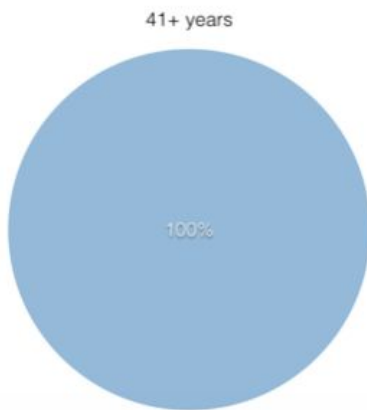
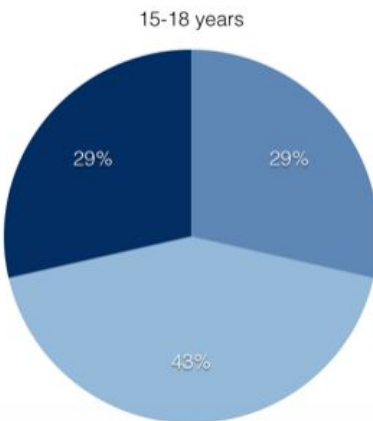
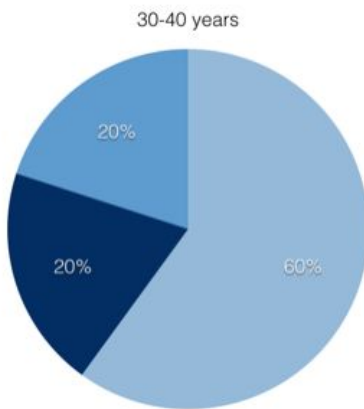
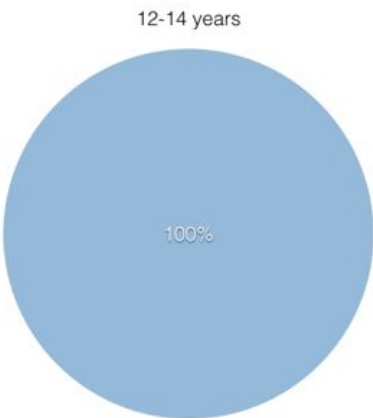
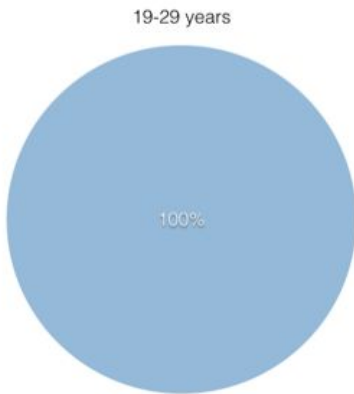
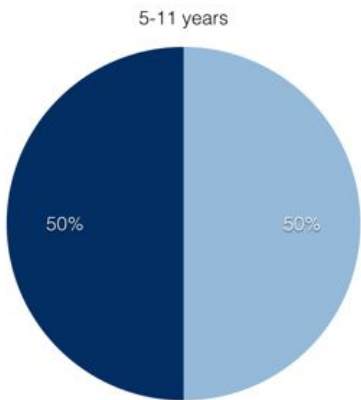
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



People with mental disorders are dangerous.

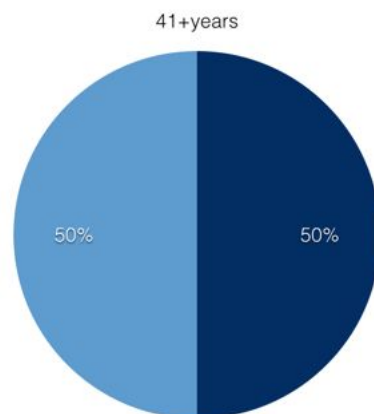
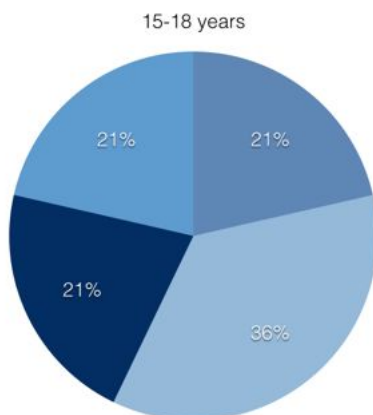
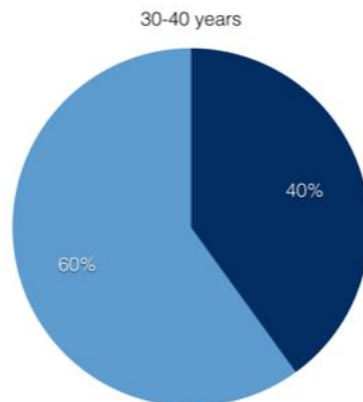
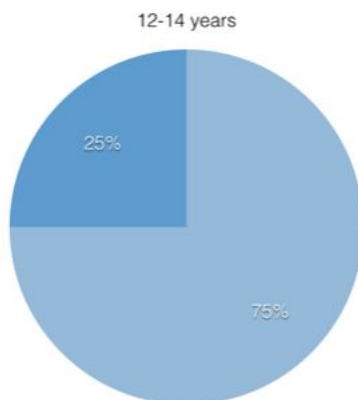
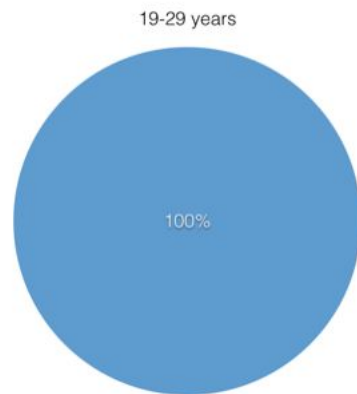
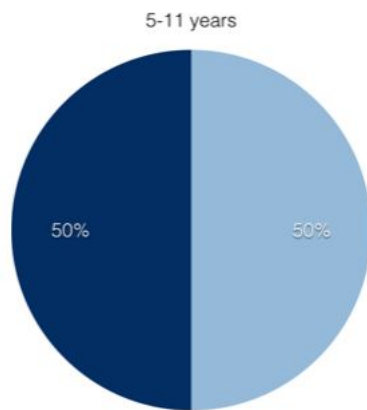
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Agree ● Strongly Agree

I



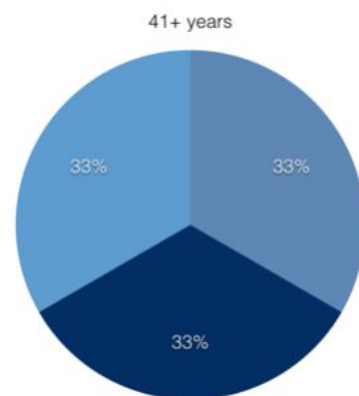
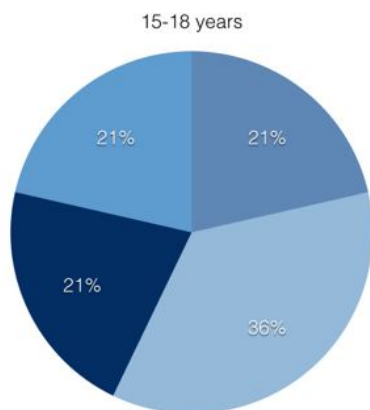
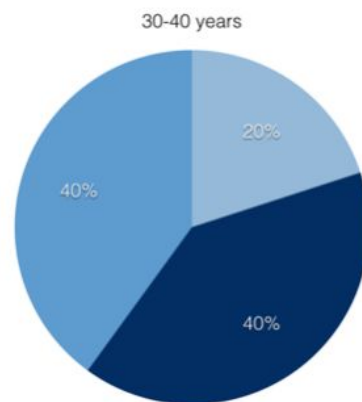
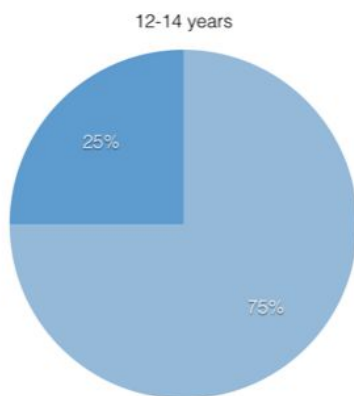
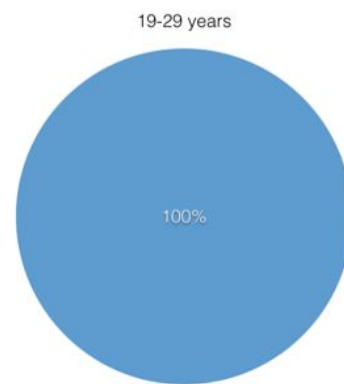
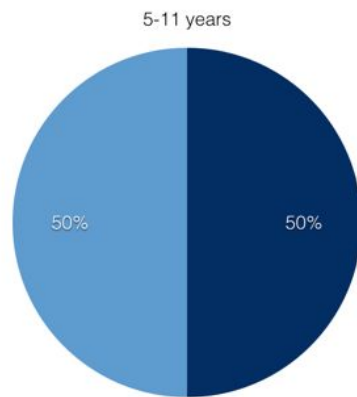
What do you feel about law enforcement?

● Strongly Dislike ● Dislike ● Like ● Strongly Like



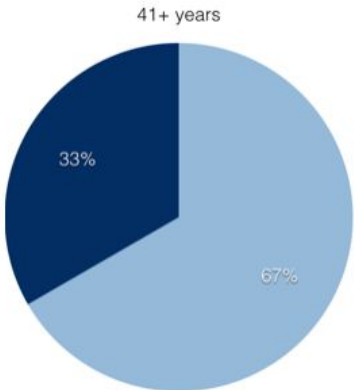
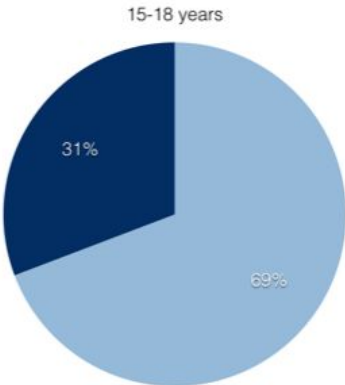
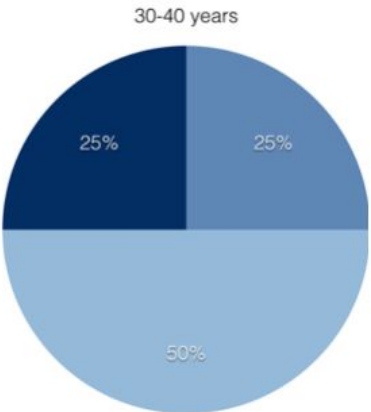
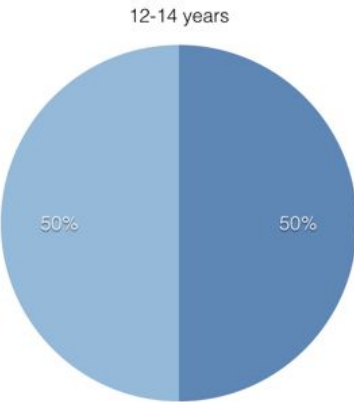
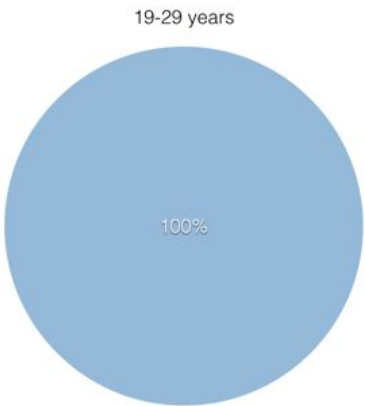
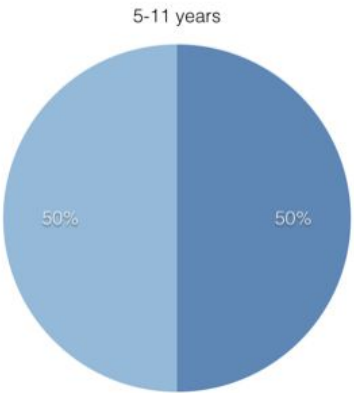
What do you think others feel about the police?

● Strongly Dislike ● Dislike ● Like ● Strongly Like



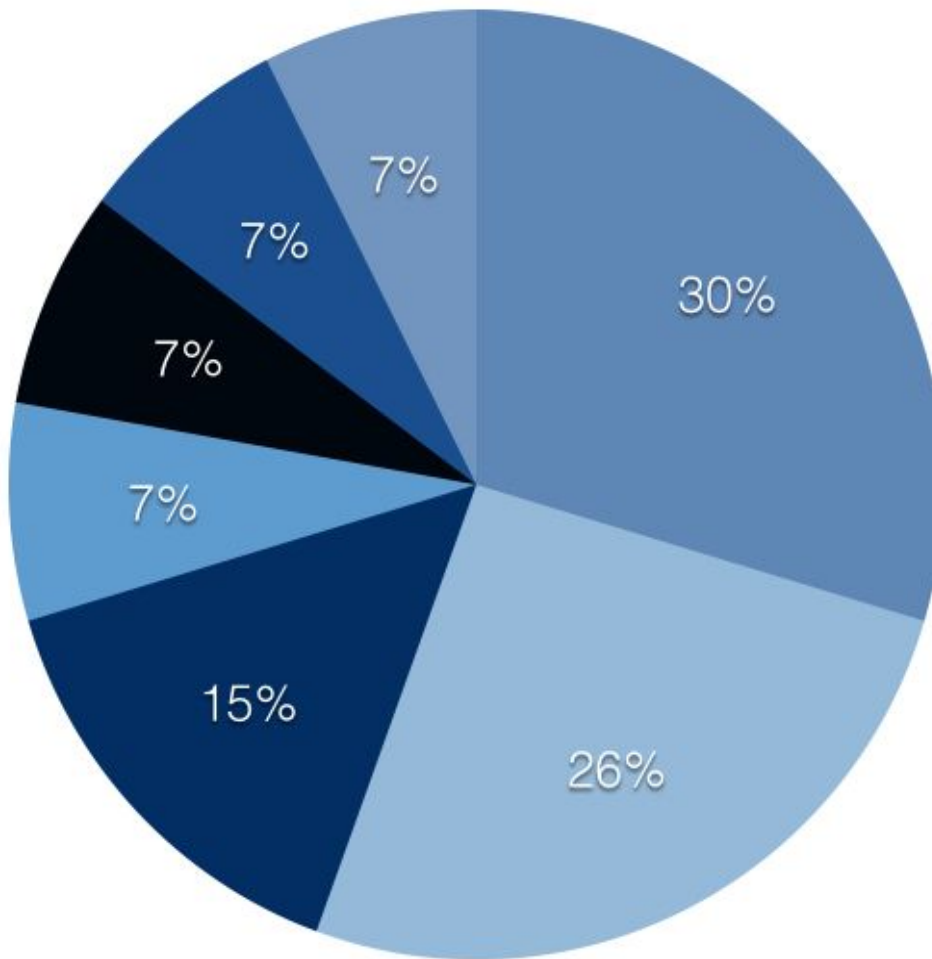
How aggressive do you think the police is?

● Very Aggressive ● Agresssive ● Not Agressive



Words Related to Law Enforcement

● Safety ● Other ● Protection ● Order ● Help ● Criminal ● Intimidating



Analysis and Conclusion



Analysis

After reviewing the data, I was able to glean interesting information about the general public's opinion on police officers. Originally, I split up my hypothesis by the various age groups and I will be doing the same in my analysis of the survey. Initially I believed that those in the 5 to 11 years old age group would view police officers as heroes and with a positive outlook. However, most children in that age group viewed police officers in a slightly negative light although they still considered them heroes. I found out that many children fear police officers mostly because of a fear of getting arrested or they feared their appearance. This fear was most probably instilled in them by their parents to influence good behavior. For the age group 12 to 14, I initially hypothesized that they wouldn't view them as heroes, but would still have a positive outlook. My hypothesis was correct, since I found that 75% of the 12 to 14 year olds I interviewed strongly like police officers. Not only that, but a 75% also believe the public had similar outlook. This was an unexpected insight that revealed many significant facts. Many 12 to 14 year olds had positive opinions because they felt that law enforcement kept them safe and protected them. The other 25% had negative views and believed that police officers oftentimes made mistakes. When it came to 15 to 18 year olds, I expected them to have a severely negative opinion toward police officers with the recent increase in negative media coverage. Surprisingly enough though, this age group's opinion varied immensely. There was no clear view found in the data I collected. Those who were in the 15 to 18 years old group were found to read the news quite often. This is an important factor to consider because it explains why the data collected from this age group was so varied. With a myriad of different opinions and biased articles constantly read by 15 to 18 year olds, it only makes sense that their point of views would vary so significantly. In addition, this supported my original hypothesis that high school students are mature enough to understand situations while still being very impressionable. On the other hand, my hypothesis on 19 to 29 year olds was completely incorrect. Instead of having more negative views, I discovered that 19 to 20 year olds were more positive and trusting when it came to law enforcement.

Additionally, 100% of 19 to 20 year olds believed that the the public strongly likes law enforcement in general. Like others, they too believed that law enforcement protected them from the darker elements of society. When analyzing the responses from individuals in the 30 to 40 years old group, I observed that my hypothesis was accurate. Although they weren't neutral, they were positive in their opinion. To elaborate, 60% of 30 to 40 year olds strongly liked police officers while the other 40% simply liked them. Additionally, when reviewing their individual responses, I found that all but one believed that law enforcement protected them and ensured their safety. This would be tremendously significant to 30 to 40 year olds because a majority of them are parents. As a result, these individuals are very protective of their children and support those who aid in the maintenance of a safe environment for their children to grow in. The data collected showed the same results in those 41 years or older.

On the subject of police brutality and aggressiveness, the data showed that a majority of individuals, for all age ranges, believed law enforcement was either aggressive or very aggressive. Only a small percentage in a select few age ranges chose to say that law enforcement is non-aggressive in general. More than 60% of all individuals surveyed believed that police brutality was currently high or moderate. The remaining percentage believed that police brutality is low and were more likely to say that they believed that police brutality issues would decrease in the future. Those who replied high or moderate had a tendency to believe that police brutality would only increase in the future. Interestingly enough, those who believed that police brutality was high were also more inclined to state that law enforcement's role in the Ferguson protests was either very aggressive or aggressive. By including a specific incident, I was able to discern additional information about how much they follow current events and about the media's impact on them. To elaborate, the protests in Ferguson received a good amount of media and news attention. More specifically, those news channels oftentimes sympathized with the protesters more and denounced the action of the local law enforcement. The coverage given to these protests then in turn influenced individuals views on the subject in general. Perhaps it takes only one heart striking event for one's opinion to forever be changed.

When on the subject of law enforcement's treatment and handling of those with mental illness, I discovered some unsurprising facts. Those with mental illnesses have been alienated and labeled as dangerous for decades. Those with mental illnesses were quickly carted off to asylums, institutions or hospitals. If an individual with a mental illness lived in a community, everyone in the community was warned to stay away and avoid all possible contact. Parts of these stereotypical view still exist today, as can be seen in the collected data. Although many individuals are sympathetic towards those with mental illnesses when police officers treat them unkindly and/or with unnecessary force, many agree that it is necessary. To elaborate, 100% of 5 to 11 year olds agree that people with mental illnesses are crazy or insane. 50% of 15 to 18 year olds either agree or strongly agree with the same statement. Furthermore, 100% of the 19 to 29 year olds strongly agreed. On the other hand, a large amount of people lacked the stereotypical belief. 75% of 12 to 14 year olds disagreed that people with mental illness are crazy or insane while 60% of 30 to 40 year olds disagrees as well. Additionally, 67% of those 41 years and older disagreed with the statement as well. However, the matter of danger had different results altogether. 50% of 5 to 11 year olds agreed that people with mental disorders are dangerous. An additional 58% of 15 to 18 year olds believed the same thing. 40% of 30 to 40 year olds agreed or strongly agreed as well. Contrary to that though, 100% of 12 to 14 and 19 to 29 year olds disagreed with the previous statement. 60% of 30 to 40 year olds and 100% of 41 years and older both disagreed too. Although there was a significant amount of individuals who opposed the statement, a impactful amount of people agreed with it. While it may seem irrelevant at first glance, agreeing with the statement is quite important. By agreeing, it is implied that those with mental illnesses need to be restrained and monitored by police officers. To add to that, it also justifies any excessive force, verbal abuse, and/or physical abuse targeted at an individual with a mental illness. This is significant because it conveys how the public still has an overall negative view toward fellow citizens with mental illnesses in this day and age.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this year, I set out to look into the general public's mind and made it my goal to discern specific information. I wanted to learn more about the complex relationship triangle between the public, those with mental illness, and law enforcement. Forensic psychiatry deals with all three of them since the field involves law, medicine, and psychology. And where law, medicine, and law involved, there are always people involved as well. Through a long learning experience, I was able to collect data and then analyzed it. What I found was a double edged sword. While some results and findings of the study were expected and unsurprising, other portions of it were unanticipated. I was unsurprised to learn that many consider those with mental illnesses insane and dangerous. However, people's responses in regards to police officers were unforeseen. I had expected a generally more negative response from most age ranges. Additionally, I initially failed to account for the various external factors for differentiating views. I failed to recognize monumental significance of the maternal and paternal instincts of parents, the fear children have of being punched by police officers for misbehaving. Overall though, I can conclude that while the media and decades old stereotypes do influence individuals' opinion on law enforcement to a certain degree, other factors play into it as well. Although the public does seem to have a more negative view towards law enforcement and their aggression, the amount of support they have is higher than anticipated.