

Cops on Film: Hollywood's Depiction of Law Enforcement in Popular Films, 1984–2014

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ABSTRACT With numerous recent incidents in which law-enforcement officers played a role in the deaths of citizens, there is a renewed focus on cops and their actions. Part of that discussion is related to the nation's preconceived notions of cops and where those ideas might originate. Popular culture contributes to those images; this study explores one source of those images: film. More specifically, it investigates the image of law enforcement on the silver screen from 1984 through 2014. With a sample of 34 films and more than 200 cop characters, this study finds a mixed general depiction of law enforcement in movies but a positive depiction of individual cop characters. The prevalent descriptor of those characters was good, hard-working, and competent law-enforcement officers. This exploratory study informs broader discussions about the images of cops found in popular culture.

Because of numerous recent incidents in which law-enforcement officers were involved in the deaths of citizens who may or may not have been engaging in unlawful activity, there is a renewed focus on cops and law-enforcement practices. The Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri), John Crawford (Beavercreek, Ohio), Walter Scott (North Charleston, South Carolina), Tamir Rice (Cleveland, Ohio), and Freddie Gray (Baltimore, Maryland) incidents, as well as many others, provoke discussion about police response and when deadly force is appropriate, given the demands on law enforcement. A quieter but no less important element of that discussion is related to the nation's preconceived notions of cops—who often are the most common public administrator with whom citizens interact—and where those perceptions might originate.

Regardless of perceptions about the role of law-enforcement officers in society, it is readily acknowledged that images of cops are ubiquitous and that those images come from many different sources. Perhaps the first source is the portrayal of those incidents in the news media. Popular culture invariably contributes to those images of law enforcement as well. In particular, narrative forms—including books, television shows, and movies—have an incredible ability to influence the images and perceptions of individuals and society in general about numerous topics (c.f. Holzer and Slater 1995; Lee and Paddock 2001; McCurdy 1995), including law enforcement.

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In light of the recent national news stories that have galvanized a debate about the role of law enforcement, this study explored one source of images about law enforcement in society: the motion picture. More specifically, it investigated the image of law enforcement on the silver screen from 1984 through 2014 to determine how cops are depicted, both generally and in terms of specific, individual characters. By exploring the portrayal of cops in film, we can better understand the images of cops in popular culture and where they originate. This understanding then may contribute to the ongoing discussion about society's expectations for law-enforcement officers.

Using a sample of 34 films and more than 200 cop characters, this study found that law enforcement has a mixed depiction; overall, the majority of films show law enforcement as good and bad, competent and incompetent, efficient and inefficient. In terms of individual cop characters, the majority was depicted as young white males with many of the expected physical attributes. Perhaps more surprisingly, the largest descriptor of these characters, however, was good, hard-working, and competent law-enforcement officers. Moreover, the actions and practices of the characters were described as typical police work in which the cops are either doing or trying to do the right thing. A much smaller percentage of characters was described as corrupt or incompetent. Therefore, the study found a mixed portrayal of law enforcement in contemporary, popular films. On the one hand, cops generally are described in mixed terms; on the other hand, individual characters seem to fare better in the assessment.

The investigation of the depiction of law enforcement on film begins with an assessment of current perceptions of cops and recent public opinion about their actions. This contextualized the

subsequent discussion about the influence of film on audiences and how government has been portrayed by Hollywood. Next, the literature on cop movies is considered, followed by a discussion of the methods and results of this study. This research is an important step, but only the first step for investigating the multiple sources of perceptions and images society has regarding law-enforcement officers, police practices, and government more generally.

IMAGES AND PERCEPTIONS OF COPS

Before exploring the image of cops on film and understanding the ability of film to influence its audiences, the study begins by investigating current public perceptions of cops and why those perceptions can be consequential, given the role of cops. This investigation assists in interpreting the results of this study and considers their implications while also better contextualizing existing research on government in film more generally.

Law-enforcement officers occupy a critical role in society and are in a position of authority as they ensure security and order. The role that they serve puts them in situations in which they interact daily with the general public, such that they are “street-level bureaucrats” (c.f. Lipsky 1980) or “front-line workers” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Because of their prominent role, officers are among the first government representatives the public thinks of and they are routinely subjected to political controversy because citizens often have conflicting attitudes about their work and the role they play (c.f. Lipsky 1980, 4; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 9–24). The attitudes of citizens are informed by myriad sources, including popular culture and their own experiences.

There have been several recent high-profile incidents in which the actions of law-enforcement officers were involved in the death

Americans do (NBC News/Marist Poll 2014). Furthermore, only 7% of whites but 35% of African Americans reported that they have very little confidence in police.

A CBS News Poll also conducted in December 2014 provided a different range of questions that explored society’s view of law enforcement. Respondents were asked how they would rate the job of local police in controlling crime in the respondents’ communities: 25% reported excellent, 28% good, and only 11% poor (CBS News Poll 2014). Responses by race present a different assessment. Whereas 28% of whites rated the police in their community as excellent, only 8% of African Americans agree (CBS News Poll 2014). Moreover, 22% of African Americans reported that the police are doing a poor job in their community, whereas only 9% of whites agree (CBS News Poll 2014).

Complex sentiments and issues underlie this brief review of polling data about law enforcement in the United States. What is particularly noteworthy, however, are the differences in opinion when respondents are asked about police in general and when they are asked about their community. Of the respondents in the CBS News Poll, 63% indicated that cops are doing a decent job in their community (CBS News Poll 2014).² When asked about police officers more generally, there also appears to be confidence in them, as noted in a Gallup Poll conducted in October 2014 that reported 57% of respondents believe police will protect them from violence (Gallup Poll 2014). These data are interesting in light of the media’s more recent coverage of law enforcement.

Undoubtedly, responses to pollsters’ questions come from a multitude of sources, including experiences, socialization, and popular culture. The latter category of influences is of particular interest. It is natural that people’s opinions about cops are influenced by their own experiences with law enforcement—perhaps

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of citizens, most of whom were minorities and many of whom were unarmed. These incidents resulted in a renewed focus on the role of law-enforcement officers in society, the use of deadly force, whether police officers should wear body cameras, and many other issues. Accordingly, public-opinion polls have sought to document Americans’ opinions on these topics.

Despite the recent outcry about police practices and the subsequent indictments of many officers in various incidents, particularly in Baltimore, Maryland, and North Charleston, South Carolina, aggregate public opinion demonstrates confidence and support of law enforcement. However, those sentiments diverge depending on an individual respondent’s race. A December 2014 poll reported that when asked about their confidence levels in police, 48% of respondents reported a great deal and 29% said a fair amount, with only 12% indicating very little confidence (NBC News/Marist Poll 2014). Among those same respondents, the breakdown by race is notable. Of whites, 83% have a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in police, whereas only 50% of African

a late-night speeding ticket—but there are many other sources of those experiences and, arguably, more significant influences.

INFLUENCE OF FILM

Popular culture has a profound ability to influence and shape the attitudes of people on a range of topics. Although the extent of this influence can be and is debated, the existence of its influence is not. Within popular culture, the narrative form—fiction, television shows, and movies—exercises significant influence on society (c.f. Kolker 1999). The influence of film stems in part from it being an art form accessible to a wide array of Americans. More specifically, narrative forms—including film—can influence perceptions on social ills (c.f. Wilson et al. 1992) and other more controversial issues, such as same-sex couples and marriage (c.f. Riggle, Ellis, and Crawford 1996). Furthermore, film can sway views on various types of professionals, such as journalists and public relations professionals (c.f. Miller 1999).

Extant research strongly suggests that films can influence our views on government (c.f. Franklin 2006; Holley and Lutte 2000; Holzer and Slater 1995; Ortega-Liston 2000). Film can influence perceptions about more abstract notions of political ideology as well as more specific views of government and civil servants, for example (c.f. Pautz and Roselle 2010; Pautz and Warnement 2013). Additionally, it is worth noting that there even is research that indicates the depiction of government in film may sway people's opinions about government (c.f. Pautz 2015).

With this documented ability of film to influence perceptions, we must consider why film has such power to shape perceptions. This ability to influence audiences stems from two factors. First, the film form provides audiences with information and lifelike experiences that they may or may not ever experience in real life (Miller 1999). Baecker (1996) and Mazur and Emmers-Sommer (2003) noted that film represents reality to its audience. "Movies can seem 'right' if they reflect common assumptions about the world and offer ways to make sense of it" (King 1999, 3). In other words, films depict reality for their audiences, regardless of whether they have had or will ever have the experience depicted on the silver screen. For example, for some people, movies that depict the inner workings of political campaigns (e.g., *Primary Colors*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Campaign*, and *Bulworth*) may be the closest they ever come to experiencing firsthand campaigns and the thrill of victory. Yet, film provides a lifelike experience that enables audiences to feel as though the experiences are real and that they have actually had them.

Second, the ability of films to provide lifelike experiences for their audiences comes from the all-encompassing experience of watching a film. Whether someone watches a film in a darkened theater full of strangers or in the comfort of one's home with friends and family, the experience is engrossing. Holzer and Slater reminded us that watching a film results in the "...total suspension of disbelief" for the duration of that film (1995, 77). Lee and Paddock (2001) noted that film is the most "psychologically persuasive" of art forms. Films entertain us and allow us to escape our reality such that we are willing to accept action sequences that would surely kill the film's hero, yet the hero manages to escape death with only a scratch. Experiencing the sights and sounds of film does much to endear us to these experiences and influences.

COPS AND FILM

In light of the ability of film to influence perceptions, we must wonder what are the images of law enforcement that we see on the silver screen, particularly with the recent renewed focus and scrutiny on cops. Cop films are not particularly new to the silver screen and cops have featured prominently in various narrative forms for centuries (Reiner 2010). King noted that cop movies play to a "wide and hungry audience" (1999, 3). In her study of crime films, Rafter noted that in the decades before *Dirty Harry* (1971), most depictions of cops in film fit into one of three stereotypes: the dopey patrolman, the tough federal agent, or the cool private investigator (2006, 112). With *Dirty Harry*, however, the cop-movie genre emerged and far more subcategories resulted, with a variety of cop characters (Rafter 2006, 117).

The depiction of police officers in popular culture and its ability to influence society is noted more specifically. Reiner contended that the mass media, in general, often is the main source for the perceptions and preferences about policing for many people (2010, 177). The media's image does not float free of the actualities

of policing, but neither is it a mirror reflection. It is a refraction of the reality, constructed in accordance with the organizational imperatives of the media industry, the ideological frames of creative personnel and audiences, and the changing balance of political and economic forces affecting both the reality and the image of policing (Reiner 2010, 178). Accordingly, the ability of film to influence the audience's perceptions about cops is significant, as is the ability to influence attitudes more broadly.

With this power to influence, a natural extension is to investigate how cops are portrayed in films to understand the images that influence audiences. As previously indicated, there has been focused study on law enforcement in film and crime movies, but those efforts do not help us to understand which images actually are projected on the screen. Reiner (2010) offered a typology of 12 models of law-enforcement films centered on seven elements: hero, crime, villain, victim, social setting, police organization, and narrative sequence. Rafter (2006) discussed cop films and provided a more nuanced categorization of films within the cop movie—crime movie genre. Additionally, many of the studies select a few films to explore for specific reasons rather than a larger, more encompassing sample of popular movies. Although these studies advance our understanding of cop films generally, they do not provide a portrait of law enforcement that the average moviegoer sees.

In the absence of a focused study on the images of cops portrayed in the movies, we look to the broader literature on government in film. Numerous studies exist about film and politics, but our particular interest is in the portrayal of government characters on film. Pautz and Roselle (2010) and Pautz and Warnement (2013) investigated the depiction of government characters in popular films—that is, those films defined as box-office successes—but they did not focus on law enforcement. Because of the ability of film to influence audiences and a general lack of research about the images of cops on the silver screen, this study endeavored to fill that gap. The focus is on popular films—also defined by box-office success as in other studies—and seeks to determine the image that movie-goers see of law enforcement. Exploring the depiction of police officers in popular films informs the broader discussion about the images of law enforcement in society and considers whether those images may have shifted.

STUDY OVERVIEW AND FILMS STUDIED

Because film can influence its audience, this study is interested in determining the image of law enforcement that is presented to movie-goers. More specifically, rather than in-depth analyses of only a few films, this research covered several decades to consider a large sample of films that might contribute to an overall perception of law enforcement. Furthermore, because film is arguably the most accessible art form to most Americans, it is worthwhile to focus on films that are a commercial success—as in the Pautz and Roselle (2010) and Pautz and Warnement (2013) studies—because they are most likely to be seen by movie-watching Americans. Therefore, films that are a box-office success enable us to consider the films most likely to influence audiences.

The films included in this study were selected based on several criteria. First, a list of the top 15 box-office-grossing films from 1984 through 2014 was compiled.² Given their high rate of performance at the box office, these films were most likely to have been seen by movie-goers.³ Research on each title determined whether law enforcement had any role other than an

insignificant character with only a few lines of dialogue.⁴ From a list of hundreds of movies, a sample of 34 films was determined (see Appendix A). Although the study encompasses 31 years, the distribution of films is far from even. The highest number was four in 1990; several years (i.e., 1986, 2002–2004, 2007, and 2009–2011) had no films included in this sample. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of films by year.

The 34 films span several genres: 23 action/adventure movies, six comedies, three crime films, one thriller, and one drama.

Once the sample was determined, coders were recruited to gather data. Undergraduate volunteers were sought at a private Midwestern university to code each movie in the study.⁶ Students who volunteered were trained in the coding instrument and

Overall, the films presented law enforcement with a mixed depiction (table 1). Nine films, or 26%, portrayed law enforcement positively (that is, coders described law enforcement as efficient, competent, and/or good). For example, in the film *Speed* (1994), the cops are determined to defuse a bomb placed on a Los Angeles city bus by a “madman” and they ultimately saved the innocent passengers.

By contrast, 21% (i.e., 7) of films depicted law enforcement negatively as inefficient, incompetent, and/or bad. In *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), for example, law enforcement was portrayed as largely incompetent; only one cop, Axel Foley, was portrayed as competent. A slight majority—53%—of the 34 films provided a mixed portrait of law enforcement. Because a majority of the

The coding instrument directed coders to assess the characters by selecting one or more various descriptors: efficient, competent, good, inefficient, incompetent, and bad.

typically coded one or two films. Completed coding instruments were checked for data integrity. Additionally, 18% of the films were coded by multiple students to ensure intercoder reliability.

The coding instrument consisted of a lengthy worksheet that included general questions about the film, how law enforcement was depicted broadly, individual law-enforcement characters who had at least one line of dialogue, and the protagonists and antagonists. The coding instrument yielded a wealth of data from the 34 films, providing information about 209 individual law-enforcement characters. On average, there were six law-enforcement characters in each film; each film had at least one.

OVERALL DEPICTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

First, the study gathered an image of law enforcement in film by exploring how cops are portrayed generally. Coders were asked to describe how they were depicted overall. The coding instrument directed coders to assess the characters by selecting one or more various descriptors: efficient, competent, good, inefficient, incompetent, and bad.

films showed cops positively and negatively, the explanations provided by coders were helpful. Frequently, law enforcement was depicted in a mixed way because the cops were constantly “messaging up,” as in *22 Jump Street* (2014), to add humor to the film; however, the cops also were chasing the “bad guys” and were not corrupt. Another example is from *Batman Forever* (1995), in which the cops were depicted as both inefficient and good because although they tried their best to pursue criminals who had taken hold of Gotham City, they were outmatched.

It is worth examining these findings further. The overall depiction of law enforcement by the decade in which a film was released provides additional points of interest (table 2).⁷

The variation in the number of films that feature cops by decade is instructive as well as the marked increase in the more positive depiction of cops generally in the films in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The films from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2010s generally depicted cops negatively. However, in the 2000s, most of the cop films had a mixed portrayal of law enforcement. This may be a reflection of the sentiment in the United States post-9/11, which viewed first responders more positively. Another explanation may be the decrease in the number of films in the top 15 box-office-grossing films that prominently featured cops. These categorizations comprise only one component of the overall depiction of law enforcement in movies.

INDIVIDUAL COP CHARACTERS

These overall portrayals of law enforcement provided background for exploring the depiction of the 209 individual cop characters coded in the sample. Before delving into how these characters behave on the silver screen, we investigated their general characteristics to contextualize their actions.

Physical Attributes

The 209 cops in these films were overwhelmingly younger white males: 89% were male. More than a third—36%—were between the ages of 31

Figure 1
Films by Year

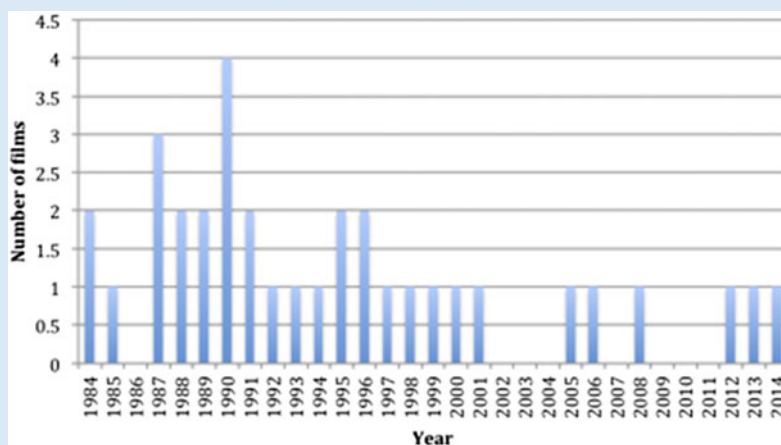


Table 1
Overall Depiction of Law Enforcement in Films

Depiction	Percentage of Films
Positive	26%
Mixed	53%
Negative	21%

Table 2
Overall Depiction of Cops by Decade of Film's Release

	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Total Number of Films
Positive	2	5	1	1	9
Depiction	20%	31%	20%	33%	
Mixed	2	2	3	0	7
Depiction	2%	13%	60%		
Negative	6	9	1	2	18
Depiction	60%	56%	20%	67%	
Total Number of Films	10	16	5	3	34

and 40; 25% were between 21 and 30; and 22% were between 41 and 50 years old. More than three quarters (78%) were Caucasian, 18% were African American, and the remaining 4% were Latino or Native American. It is perhaps unsurprising that the cops were young white males because that depiction arguably comports with our images of cops in society.

In addition to basic demographic data, coders were asked to describe the physical attributes of each cop portrayed. These attributes were largely in line with society's stereotypes of law enforcement officers: tall and athletic or physically fit. Yet, many characters were described as simply average or old and overweight. Table 3 lists the most frequently mentioned physical attributes of the characters. It is important that coders were asked to describe the attributes in an open-text field. Accordingly, multiple attributes often were noted; therefore,

Table 3
Physical Attributes of Cop Characters

Attribute	Percentage of Characters
Hair Color/Style Noted	42%
Tall	19%
Physically Fit/Athletic	13%
Average	12%
Nothing Notable	12%
Overweight	12%
Old	11%
Thin	10%

the categories are not mutually exclusive. Stated differently, one character might be noted as tall, average, and old whereas another might be noted simply as overweight.

For 42% of the characters, the coders noted the color or style of their hair. For our purposes, whether a cop had blond or brown hair⁸ is of less interest than other attributes, such as whether he appeared to be fit and athletic or if the physical description contributed to the stereotype of the overweight cop eating donuts.

These descriptions are not necessarily surprising because we expect cops to be physically fit and athletic. Furthermore, given society's stereotypes, descriptions of overweight police officers are not unexpected. It is interesting that a sizable percentage of characters—almost a quarter⁹—were described as average or with nothing notable in their appearance. This may indicate a tacit presumption that cops appear a certain way in society and this image is reflected in the films.

Descriptions of Characters

Next, the coders were asked in an open-text field to note the adjectives used to describe the cop characters. Again, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive because some characters had multiple adjectives and others did not. Table 4 lists the most frequently cited descriptions of the movie characters.

Several points are worth making about these data. First, the description for the highest percentage of characters, 27%, was good, hard-working, competent cops. The category with the next highest percentage, 17%, was intelligent. In other words, coders described most of the law-enforcement officials on screen as competent, smart, good cops. An example of a character who personifies these traits is Jim Gordon in several Batman films. Despite challenges within the Gotham police force, Gordon is a diligent cop in pursuit of justice for his city. This finding is fascinating because cops in movies are often thought of as arrogant, tough, and hyper masculine guys who save the day. The first significant category that might be construed as a negative description is the 15% of characters who were described as tough and intimidating. Arguably, however, cops are supposed to be tough. Sergeant Callahan, in several *Police Academy* films, is described as a tough, no-nonsense instructor who routinely intimidates the new cadets. Perhaps a more expected characterization is the 14% of cops labeled as aggressive, arrogant, and impulsive, which may be more aligned with our expectation of cops on screen.

Table 4
Descriptions of Cop Characters

Adjectives	Percentage of Characters
Good, Hard-Working, Competent	27%
Intelligent	17%
Tough, Intimidating	15%
Caring, Helpful, Nice	14%
Aggressive, Arrogant, Impulsive	14%
Funny	11%
Nervous, Timid	9%
Incompetent, Dumb	8%
Brave, Strong	7%

Second, the coders considered what types of cops the characters portray and their actions on screen.

Types and Roles of Cops

The type of law-enforcement official and the role of that character in a particular movie may provide a more complete portrait of cops on the silver screen in recent decades. Coders were asked to identify the character's type of law enforcement officer, such as a local city cop or a federal agent. The overwhelming majority of the 209 characters (70%) was local law enforcement—that is, city cops. Within this grouping, 43% portrayed cops from a real-life city, such as Los Angeles or New York City, and 27% represented a fictional city, such as Gotham City or the unnamed metropolitan city in the *Police Academy* movies. Another 10% of characters

officials, and conducting an interrogation. These actions were characterized in this manner because the coder provided little additional information to characterize them; for example, a coder indicated that a US Marshal in *The Fugitive* (1993) simply assists in the search for Richard Kimble throughout the film. It is interesting to observe that so many characters were described matter of factly without additional statements indicating the success of the characters in their objectives. However, this may be a function of the coders' interpretations of the instrument questions.

Beyond the more typical and even expected descriptions of the cop characters' behaviors, 14% of the characters' actions were described as good cops trying to do the right thing. For example, a police captain in *Police Academy 2: Their First Assignment* (1985) tries to advocate for the band of inexperienced and

Somewhat surprisingly, especially given the specific plot, 68% of the cop characters were coded as minor or insignificant; another 25% were labeled as protagonists and the remaining 7% were antagonists.

depicted Federal Bureau of Investigation agents; the remaining characters represented an array of other agencies, including airport police and the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Another important facet of these characters is how prominent their roles were on screen. Stated differently, do the cops have prominent roles, are they the “good guys,” or are they the “bad guys”? Somewhat surprisingly, especially given the specific plot, 68% of the cop characters were coded as minor or insignificant; another 25% were labeled as protagonists and the remaining 7% were antagonists. A review of the films included in this study might lead us to wonder why so many characters were described as minor. For instance, in the film *The Departed* (2006), the entire cast appears to be either Boston police officers or members of the Massachusetts State Police. However, when we consider how many of the cops in that film are background characters, it becomes obvious that each film has no more than one or two characters who are the “good guys” and the “bad guys.”

Actions and Practices of Characters

With the indication from coders that the police officers seem to occupy insignificant or minor roles in the films, the actions and practices were sought for these characters in an open text field. Table 5 lists the most commonly cited actions and practices of each of the 209 characters in the 34 films. Like the physical attributes and adjectives, an individual cop character may have more than one action or practice code; therefore, the categories in table 5 are not mutually exclusive—although most characters have only one action category.

Table 5 clarifies why 31% of the 209 characters' actions and practices are described as minor or insignificant. In the descriptions of their actions, coders routinely noted characters that answer the phone at police dispatch or inform a commanding officer about a situation, as many do in the 1988 film *Die Hard*. At 28%, “typical police work” is the next largest grouping of the actions and practices of cop characters. This category describes actions that include behaviors such as controlling crowds, defusing an explosive device, providing information to other law-enforcement

often incompetent new recruits in his precinct despite the police commissioner's berating him for their poor performance. Dick Tracy, in the film of the same name, is described as a good cop in pursuit of justice.

As expected, various characters' actions also are described negatively. The next category of actions describes characters that are incompetent, inept, and lazy; 12% of characters fit this category. For instance, in *Police Academy 2: Their First Assignment*, Officer Vinnie Schulman is too busy eating (and often from a trashcan on the street) to respond to an armed robbery, much to his partner's dismay. This category is to be expected because movie-goers frequently see inept cops as humorous, which makes the lone cop who defies the odds seem that much more capable. On this point, 6% of characters' actions fit the category of cops who defied their superior's orders or broke organizational protocol to pursue justice and even “save the day.” A quintessential example of this behavior is in *Speed* when Jack Traven is told by his commanding officer not to get on the bomb-rigged bus but he does so anyway because he figures it is the best way to save the day. Actions like these are among those behaviors that audiences expect to see heroic cops take in film, especially because they often risk the character's own well-being.

Table 5
Actions and Practices of Cop Characters

Actions and Practices	Percentage of Characters
Insignificant	31%
Typical Police Work	28%
Tries to Do the Right Thing/Good Cop	14%
Inept, Incompetent, Lazy	12%
Defies Orders, Protocol	6%
Corrupt	5%

Movie-goers also expect to see corrupt cops on the screen; 5% of characters in this study were depicted in this manner. In films such as *The Dark Knight*, cops work with organized crime; in *The Departed*, they collude with Frank Costello, the leader of the mob. It is somewhat surprising that the actions of more cop characters were not described in this manner.

Exploring the actions and practices of cop characters in these films resulted in both expected and unexpected insights. It is unsurprising that some cops acted in a corrupt manner or were depicted as inept—often in humorous ways—to serve an important function in the narrative. Moreover, cops like Jack Traven, who defy commands from their superiors, are not unexpected either because those actions often personify the heroism we often look for on the screen. Perhaps more surprising, however, is the larger percentage of characters whose actions are described as “being a good cop” and “trying to do the right thing.” Movie-goers might expect more negative depictions of cops because many people perceive them as infringing on their freedoms and overzealous in the use of their authority.

The actions and practices of the 209 characters, combined with other descriptions, may best be summarized by the coders’ assessments of the overall depiction of each cop character (table 6).

Coders reported that a majority of the cop characters (55%) were depicted positively; slightly more than a quarter (28%) were depicted negatively. The remaining characters either had a mixed depiction or there was insufficient screen time for the coder to make an assessment. These findings might be surprising, but they align with positive descriptions of the characters and their actions and practices.

When the depictions are compared with the individual characters’ actions and practices, expected patterns emerge. For instance, corrupt and incompetent cops typically are depicted negatively; those shown trying to do the right thing are depicted positively. It is interesting that cop characters who defy the commands of their superiors, often in the pursuit of justice, have an overall positive depiction. For example, in the *Die Hard* films, John McClane routinely defies commands and balks at police protocol when pursuing the bad guys; however, his overall depiction is positive because he is trying to save the day—and often does. Cop characters who engage in less glamorous work—described in the study as typical police actions—also are generally depicted positively with only a small percentage of their actions assessed negatively.

DISCUSSION OF HOW LAW ENFORCEMENT IS DEPICTED

The examination of 209 cop characters in films from 1984 to 2014 resulted in a fascinating portrait of law enforcement. Overall, there appears to be two broad categories—good cops and bad

cops—without many characters occupying the middle ground. Most of the law-enforcement officials in the films were depicted positively, performing either typical police work or serving a minor role, trying to be good cops, and physically nondescript. A subsection of the characters is inept, lazy, incompetent, and even corrupt, but they comprise a minority. Initially, these images of cops on film may be striking; however, given both the narrative form and the general perceptions about government in society, these findings might not be as surprising.

First, the finding that there appears to be two general images of police officers in film should be expected, given the dictates of the narrative form. Most films range from 90 to 120 minutes, allowing filmmakers only a brief window to convey often complex stories. Accordingly, artistic license is used in the film medium to make a story accessible to the average audience member, conveying its intricacies and nuances from start to finish in about two hours. As a result, many filmmakers take liberties with the complexities of stories to simplify challenging situations. For instance, in many cases, “good guys” are noble and heroic and “bad guys” are plainly evil with few redeeming qualities. The filmmakers’ choices foster good storytelling but may oversimplify intricate scenarios. Law-enforcement characters must fit into these confines; therefore, if they have minor roles, the complexity of their work may necessarily be oversimplified. Films that portray the complexities of law enforcement, such as Martin Scorsese’s *The Departed*, convey some of this complexity in some characters but do not represent the daily challenges that cops encounter in real life. Rafter supported this point and further stated that it is easier to make the lawbreakers more entertaining than the good guys (2006, 111).

Second, there was a mixed general depiction of law enforcement in these films, but most of the individual cop characters were portrayed positively. Recall that 53% of the films in this study had a mixed depiction of cops generally, with approximately 25% showing law enforcement positively and the remainder negatively. Yet, more than half of the 209 characters were depicted positively. These findings concur with other studies that find generally negative (or at least mixed) depictions of government on film but more positive depictions of individual government characters (c.f. Pautz 2015; Pautz and Roselle 2010; Pautz and Warnement 2013). Furthermore, these findings speak to the broader points that Goodsell (2014) made about the public’s views of government more generally. He noted that Americans have a fascinating and complex view of their government. Generally speaking, they dislike government and have little positive associations with bureaucrats; yet, when those opinions are investigated more deeply, Americans generally have positive interactions with government and bureaucrats. These sentiments may explain the portrayal of law enforcement on the silver screen. This study found that law enforcement has a mixed depiction at best, yet individual cop characters are portrayed more positively. Perhaps Hollywood reflects Americans’ views about government more generally and/or those views influenced the coders’ assessments in this study.

It is instructive to relate these findings to the initial discussion of overall opinions about cops, especially since the summer of 2015 and the ensuing debates about the use of force and the role of police in society. Particularly striking is the overwhelming image of cops on the screen who are white males. Polling data reflects a racial divide among citizens and their views on policing.

Table 6

Overall Depiction of Cop Characters

Depiction	Percentage of Characters ¹⁰
Positive	55%
Both Positive and Negative	9%
Negative	28%
Neutral	9%

This study was too small to focus on race, but what is seen is that the depiction of cops in film is white; therefore, future research should consider a more focused investigation of race. Additional research should focus on the perceptions of individuals about how the race of cops in movies could be a factor in attitudes and perceptions. Finally, the ethnic backgrounds of the coders might be worth considering, along with their assessments of both law enforcement generally and individual cop characters.

Ultimately, the images of cops held by Americans—regardless of their origins—affect the attitudes and approaches to interacting with them in society. Those images also shape responses to the recent incidents of officer–citizen-involved shootings. Law-enforcement officers are frontline workers who must always contend with perceptions that may or may not be accurate; understanding where those perceptions originate might enable deeper reflection and, therefore, responses. Although it is unlikely that Hollywood’s depiction of cops will change dramatically in either direction in the future, it is important to acknowledge this source of perceptions in popular culture and recognize the impact it may have on them. Politicians and public administrators would do well to acknowledge and strive to combat those perceptions because much is frequently misunderstood about the work of those on the front lines (c.f. Goodsell 2014; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This study investigated the portrait of law enforcement generally and individual police characters specifically in popular films from 1984 through 2014. Overall, it found a mixed general depiction of law enforcement on the silver screen but a positive depiction of individual cop characters. This initial research effort provides a foundation for future work in this area; the examination of cop movies should continue, particularly in light of discussions about law-enforcement practices and society’s perceptions of them. More research is needed because the influence of film should not be underestimated, particularly among young people who represent a significant portion of the movie-going population (Pautz 2015). In particular, additional research should construct a much larger sample of films to investigate cop characters and law enforcement more generally. Future research also should assess audiences’ impressions of cops on film and the potential impact those impressions have on perceptions of real-life law enforcement.

Finally, the silver screen is not the only venue for depictions of cops; they are central characters in several television shows. Additional study is needed to investigate the depictions of cop characters in shows ranging from the *Law & Order* franchise to *The Wire*, *Castle*, and *Bones*. The regularity of television programs compared to the viewing of films might affect audiences, and with television’s format, those depictions may be far richer and more complex than film characters. Additionally, the news media’s coverage of recent incidents of police-involved shootings should be explored methodically to determine whether those depictions also affect perceptions.

In conclusion, the fact that cops feature prominently in popular film is unlikely to change in the future. After all, narrative conventions often hold that the typical “good guy” is a cop. Accordingly, as the discussion of the role of cops in society and appropriate use of force continues, more research is needed to investigate the depiction of these characters on film and to study the possible effects

that these portrayals have on the perceptions of the American public. Public opinions are shaped by many factors and we need to investigate the images of cops and government more generally on the silver screen. Understanding these factors may enable government to respond more effectively and with deeper understanding to the attitudes and opinions of the citizens it serves. The challenges that frontline workers face are significant and public perceptions frequently compound those efforts. ■

NOTES

1. When responses to this question are categorized by race, 38% of African Americans state that police are doing an excellent or good job in their community, compared to 69% of whites (CBS News Poll 2014).
2. Data on box office receipts are available from Box Office Mojo at www.boxofficemojo.com.
3. The films examined in this study represent several decades; therefore, their effect on audiences may be cumulative, depending on which films a movie-goer has viewed. Because of the methodology used, direct connections to recent instances of citizen–officer shootings cannot be made.
4. Films that did not feature law enforcement in a supporting or prominent role were of less interest because this research is focused on the images of cops in film. Pautz and Warnement (2013) provided an overview of how frequently cops appear in film compared to other categories of government officials, such as politicians or teachers.
5. Genres were determined based on the description provided by the Internet Movie Database, available at www.imdb.com.
6. The participation of some coders was incentivized with extra-credit opportunities from their professors.
7. Of course, given the small sample of films in this study, definitive conclusions about how each decade presented cops in film are not possible.
8. When hair was noted by coders, it was not always the color; facial hair (or its absence) was frequently reported.
9. The characters coded as “average” and “nothing notable” were mutually exclusive resulting in the ability to collapse the percentages.
10. Due to rounding, percentages do not equal 100.

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APPENDIX A: Film Sample

Film	Year
<i>22 Jump Street</i>	2014
<i>Another 48 Hours</i>	1990
<i>Batman</i>	1989
<i>Batman Begins</i>	2005
<i>Batman Forever</i>	1995
<i>Beverly Hills Cop</i>	1984
<i>Beverly Hills Cop 2</i>	1987
<i>Dick Tracy</i>	1990
<i>Die Hard</i>	1988
<i>Die Hard 2: Die Harder</i>	1990
<i>Die Hard 3: With a Vengeance</i>	1995
<i>Double Jeopardy</i>	1999
<i>Dragnet</i>	1987
<i>Face/Off</i>	1997
<i>Hannibal</i>	2001
<i>Kindergarten Cop</i>	1990
<i>Lethal Weapon</i>	1987
<i>Lethal Weapon 2</i>	1989
<i>Lethal Weapon 3</i>	1992
<i>Lethal Weapon 4</i>	1998
<i>Police Academy</i>	1984
<i>Police Academy 2: Their First Assignment</i>	1985
<i>Ransom</i>	1996
<i>Speed</i>	1994
<i>The Dark Knight</i>	2008
<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>	2012
<i>The Departed</i>	2006
<i>The Fugitive</i>	1993
<i>The Heat</i>	2013
<i>The Naked Gun 2 1/2: The Smell of Fear</i>	1991
<i>The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad</i>	1988
<i>The Rock</i>	1996
<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i>	1991
<i>Traffic</i>	2000