

Helping or Enforcing? Service, Security, and Occupational Identity in Female Criminal Justice Students' Intent to Enter Law Enforcement

Sherah L. Basham^{1,*}, Ashley T. French², Bethany Bray³, Jennifer Mitsch⁴ and Anovia Slaughter⁵

¹*Tennessee Safety Net Research Consortium, Social Work Office of Research & Public Service, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA*

²*Department of Emergency Management, Homeland Security, and Criminal Justice, College of Safety and Emergency Services, Columbia Southern University, Orange Beach, Alabama, USA*

³*University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, USA*

⁴*City of Cincinnati Police Department, Criminal Investigations Section, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA*

⁵*Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, Arizona, USA*

Abstract: Women remain significantly underrepresented in law enforcement, comprising less than 14% of sworn officers in the United States despite decades of recruitment initiatives. Understanding what motivates or deters female criminal justice students from pursuing law enforcement careers is fundamental for addressing this persistent gap. This study examines the factors influencing female criminal justice students' intent to pursue a law enforcement career, using survey data collected from 292 female students enrolled in criminal justice programs across the United States in 2020. Using exploratory factor analysis, three motivational scales were constructed: pay and security, service orientation, and occupational identity. Binary logistic regression results indicate that occupational identity, characterized by tangible policing symbols such as carrying a weapon and wearing a uniform, was the strongest positive predictor of intent to pursue a career in law enforcement. Conversely, both service-oriented and pay-and-security motivations were associated with lower odds of pursuing a career in law enforcement. Except for a marginal association for the smallest racial subgroup, demographic factors (age, marital status, child status, and political affiliation) were not significant predictors. Findings are discussed in relation to the gendered construction of law enforcement identity, the service motivation paradox, and their implications for recruitment policy.

Keywords: Women in policing, criminal justice education, law enforcement, gender and policing.

INTRODUCTION

Criminal justice education has experienced considerable fluctuations in popularity over the past several decades. Although the field once attracted large numbers of students, with 44,000 associate degrees conferred in 2011-2012 and 62,723 bachelor's degrees in 2014-2015, interest in the major has subsequently waned (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025a, 2025b). Despite this decline, many universities continue to offer criminal justice programs, and numerous agencies maintain college education requirements while offering incentives for employees to pursue higher education. Understanding the factors that influence students' decisions to pursue degrees in criminal justice is key for addressing workforce needs and enhancing diversity within the field. In applied disciplines such as criminal justice, the choice of major matters beyond the individual student, shaping who

enters the field and the values they bring. Examining why students choose a major, therefore, offers a window into the future composition and diversity of the justice workforce.

Benefits of Criminal Justice Higher Education

Research consistently supports the value of a college education for professionals in the criminal justice field. College-educated criminal justice professionals are presumed to be better prepared for work in the community and demonstrate greater tolerance toward people who are different from themselves (Carter & Sapp, 1990; Carter *et al.*, 1989; Guller, 1972; Worden, 1990). Additionally, these professionals are considered better decision-makers compared to their colleagues without postsecondary degrees (Fitzgerald, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Roberg, 1978). Furthermore, college-educated police officers demonstrate significantly lower rates of use-of-force incidents than their non-college-educated counterparts (Johnson *et al.*, 2022; Paoline & Terrill, 2007). These findings show the importance of

*Address correspondence to this author at the Tennessee Safety Net Research Consortium, Social Work Office of Research & Public Service, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA; Tel: (865) 776-2396; E-mail: sbasham@utk.edu

understanding what motivates students to enter criminal justice programs and, in turn, pursue careers in the field.

Motivations Behind Criminal Justice Major Choice

Students' reasons for choosing criminal justice are varied rather than uniform, and understanding them informs how programs recruit, advise, and retain students, as well as how agencies plan their future workforce. The following sections review the influences that recur most often in studies of criminal justice major selection.

Students' selection of a college major is primarily grounded in genuine interest in the subject. Research shows that interest forms the core foundation of this decision-making process, often outweighing outside influences or practical considerations. DeMarie and Aloise-Young (2003) found that not a single student in their study reported being completely disinterested in their major, and students consistently identified personal interest as one of the most important reasons for their choice. These findings suggest that, at its base, major selection is driven by students' desire to engage with material they find meaningful, enjoyable, and consistent with their personal curiosity.

Social Responsibility

When examining the rationales for selecting criminal justice as a major, multiple elements often appeal to students. This includes the opportunity to help people in the community (Wallace, 2023; Yim, 2009). This service-oriented motivation is consistent with the view that criminal justice attracts students who prioritize community impact and public welfare. This supports the field's identity as a profession rooted in social responsibility, in which helping others is an essential component of both the work and the justice system's greater mission.

Family and Social Network Influences

Family and social network influences play a substantial role in shaping students' decisions to pursue careers in criminal justice. Students who have relatives, mentors, or close contacts already working in the field are more likely to view criminal justice as a viable and familiar career path. Research shows that these network effects are not evenly distributed: White students are significantly more likely than non-White students to report that family members or high school contacts influenced their decision to major in criminal justice (Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003). This pattern is also

evident among women, with White female recruits being twice as likely as Black female recruits to cite family encouragement as a factor in their career choice (Ermer, 1978). Since the criminal justice workforce has historically been predominantly White, these family-based connections can create a "tradition effect," making career entry more common among students whose families already have ties to the field (Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003).

At the same time, other research suggests that many traditional sources of guidance, such as high school counselors, open houses, peers, and even perceptions of major difficulty, play a far less influential role in students' major selection than often assumed (Ridener *et al.*, 2020). This is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of minority students. Some studies indicate that minorities have historically been discouraged from entering policing (Kaminski, 1993) or have not received the same level of family support. Stringer *et al.* (2023) highlight this pattern through a Black student's account of pursuing a career in policing despite family expectations rooted in other professions. However, contrasting evidence from Tartaro and Krimmel (2003) found no significant racial differences in the influence of family or high school contacts on major selection, suggesting that the role of social networks may vary widely across individuals and that additional factors likely shape students' decisions.

Job Opportunities, Promotion, & Security

Students select criminal justice majors for a range of reasons, but job opportunities and long-term security consistently emerge as central considerations. Most students view the degree as a pathway to stable employment, reinforcing the perception that criminal justice offers reliable career prospects (Stringer & Murphy, 2020). When examining specific occupational interests, law enforcement positions attract the greatest enthusiasm, while roles such as court clerk receive far less interest. This pattern is consistent with earlier findings showing that criminal justice majors are more strongly drawn to law enforcement careers than students in other fields (Courtright & Mackey, 2004; Dantzer, 2003). Federal law enforcement positions are rated as the most appealing among both majors and non-majors (Dantzer, 2003), whereas security guard roles are viewed as the least desirable. Beyond initial career entry, educational attainment also plays a meaningful role in long-term advancement within policing. Hilal and Densley (2013) reported that nearly half of officers who pursued college coursework after

entering the profession reported doing so primarily for career advancement, and promotion requirements in many agencies, such as bachelor's degrees for supervisory or command ranks, further support the value of higher education for upward mobility. Hence, students may be motivated not only by interest in the field but also by the recognition that a criminal justice degree can support both entry into and progression within law enforcement careers. Unfortunately, many police departments have reduced their education requirements in the past decade rather than increasing them. Facing recruitment shortages, agencies that once required college credits or degrees have adjusted their standards to broaden the applicant pool (Yancey-Bragg, 2025). This marks a clear shift away from earlier professionalization efforts that emphasized higher education as a prerequisite for policing.

Student Demographics

In addition to these broader patterns, demographic influences, particularly those related to race, gender, and age, offer further insight into how students navigate their decision to major in criminal justice. First, research shows that female students are more likely than males to pursue public service degrees (Simpson, 2001), a pattern that fits the types of roles they tend to prefer within criminal justice as women often gravitate toward positions that emphasize the social-work and community-oriented aspects of policing (Golden, 1982) and consistently rate service-oriented motivations, such as helping others, fighting crime, and enforcing laws, as more important than men do (Courtright & Mackey, 2004). Despite these strong service-based motivations, studies repeatedly find that women remain significantly less likely than men to pursue law enforcement careers (Den Houter et al., 2023; Díaz & Núño, 2021; Stringer et al., 2023). This has been documented by studies reporting that women comprise less than 14% of sworn officers and 20% of recruits in state and local agencies (NYU School of Law, 2025). This underrepresentation has prompted initiatives such as 30x30, which aim to increase female recruitment and highlight the importance of understanding what draws women to the major.

Racial and ethnic differences also shape students' motivations for entering the field. White students are more likely than non-White students to value community status and express interest in wearing uniforms (Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003), though both groups report similar motivations, including excitement, protection from oppression, and helping people solve problems. Compassion-driven motivations appear

particularly significant for Black female officers (Ermer, 1978). More recent research suggests that minority students place greater importance on opportunities for advancement and autonomy compared to White students (Foley et al., 2008). Additionally, social networks influence major selection differently across groups: males, Whites, and Hispanics report stronger influence from their networks, whereas African Americans and women report less influence (Stringer & Murphy, 2020), a pattern that may reflect the field's predominantly White and male composition. Finally, Watt (2024) reported that Black students selected the courts, corrections, and the law as major areas of interest, while White students selected policing and the courts.

Age appears to shape criminal justice career interests more than academic standing. Although earlier studies suggested that upper-division students view law enforcement less favorably, recent findings by Li et al. (2021) show no meaningful link between year in school and career interest. Instead, interest declines as students get older, perhaps due to concerns about meeting physical demands, managing family responsibilities, or navigating strict federal age limits that restrict entry and retirement timelines. These practical considerations help explain why students in their late twenties and beyond express reduced interest in pursuing law enforcement roles (Li et al., 2021).

Measuring Motivations for Criminal Justice Careers

Efforts to measure why students and recruits enter criminal justice careers share a common lineage in early policing-motivation research. Lester (1983), for example, surveyed reasons for becoming a police officer and grouped them into pay-and-security, service, and power-and-status dimensions, an organizing logic that continued to inform later instruments. While Lester's scale established that career motivations cluster into a small number of interpretable factors, it was developed on police applicants rather than students and has been used comparatively little in research on criminal justice majors.

The instrument most directly relevant to the present study is the survey developed by Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) to examine the career choices and characteristics of criminal justice undergraduates. Surveying 400 students across twelve programs in seven states, they assessed why students chose to study criminal justice, what they hoped to gain, and

where they intended to work, and documented that both reasons for studying criminal justice and ultimate career goals varied by race and gender. Their item set, asking students to rate the importance of motivations such as making a decent salary, seeking a secure position with benefits, helping people solve problems, protecting people from oppression, wearing a uniform, and carrying a weapon, maps closely onto the security, service, and occupational identity orientations examined here. Tartaro and Krimmel (2003) subsequently re-analyzed these data to model the effect of race on students' career choices, finding that bivariate racial differences in motivation and career goals largely attenuated in multivariate models. Their survey has since served as a template for research on criminal justice major selection and career interests, and it forms the basis of the instrument used in the current study. The same adapted instrument was also administered to homeland security majors surveyed during the same data collection effort, providing an early cross-disciplinary test of its applicability beyond traditional criminal justice samples (Basham, 2021).

This study diverges from previous applications of the Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) items in a key way. Whereas earlier research typically analyzed each motivation item individually, treating reasons for career choice as discrete preferences, this study employs exploratory factor analysis to identify the latent motivational dimensions - pay and security, service orientation, and occupational identity - that underlie these items. This approach enables an assessment of whether coherent motivational orientations, rather than isolated preferences, predict women's intent to enter law enforcement. In this manner, the Krimmel and Tartaro framework is extended to an exclusively female sample within the unique context of 2020.

CURRENT STUDY

Despite substantial research on why students choose criminal justice as a major, the literature has paid comparatively little attention to what motivates female students to pursue law enforcement careers, particularly as distinct from corrections, probation, or other justice-related fields. This gap is significant given the persistent underrepresentation of women in sworn law enforcement roles and the growing urgency of recruitment initiatives such as the 30x30 pledge. The present study addresses this gap directly by examining the motivational factors that shape female criminal justice students' intent to pursue law enforcement careers.

A key conceptual contribution of this study is the use of exploratory factor analysis to identify latent motivational dimensions from established survey items, rather than treating each item individually as prior research has done. This approach allows the examination of broader motivational orientations, such as security-seeking, service orientation, and occupational identity, as theoretically coherent constructs rather than as a collection of discrete preferences. In doing so, the study builds on the Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) survey while extending it to a sample that is both exclusively female and situated in a unique historical moment.

Theoretically, this study conceptualizes career motivations not simply as ranked preferences but as expressions of identity. It posits that the alignment between an individual's self-concept and the symbolic meaning of a given role shapes whether that role is pursued (Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Applied to policing, an identity-congruence framework suggests that students whose self-concepts align with the masculinized, authority-centered symbolism of the sworn officer role, embodied in the uniform, weapon, and power to arrest, will be more likely to pursue law enforcement careers. In contrast, students whose self-concepts emphasize relational or service-oriented values may seek alternative pathways within the broader field of criminal justice rather than exiting it altogether.

Framed in this way, the present study moves beyond identifying which motivations are associated with law enforcement career intentions to examine whether an identity-congruence mechanism better explains observed gendered patterns in career selection. Specifically, it assesses whether service- and security-oriented women are disproportionately less likely to pursue policing, not due to a lack of interest in criminal justice broadly, but because of a misalignment between their self-concepts and the symbolic structure of the policing role. This perspective directly informs the following research questions.

The primary research question guiding this study is: *What motivational factors predict female criminal justice students' intent to pursue a career in law enforcement?*

Based on the theoretical framework and prior literature, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Female students with higher scores on the occupational identity scale will have significantly

greater odds of intending to pursue a law enforcement career. The tangible symbols of law enforcement work, the uniform, the badge, and the authority to use force, are central to the sworn officer role. Students who identify with these symbols should be more drawn to law enforcement than to other criminal justice careers.

- H2:** Female students with higher scores on the service scale will have lower odds of intending to pursue a career in law enforcement. Prior research consistently shows that women are more likely than men to prioritize helping others and community service as career motivations. However, students whose primary motivation is service-oriented may gravitate toward roles, such as social work, victim advocacy, probation, or community corrections, that they perceive as more directly fulfilling this orientation than patrol-based policing.
- H3:** Female students with higher scores on the pay and security scale will have lower odds of intending to pursue a law enforcement career. While law enforcement offers benefits such as pensions and job stability, students motivated primarily by financial security may perceive other public-sector or professional careers as offering comparable or superior compensation with fewer physical risks and less social stigma in the current political climate.

If supported, these hypotheses would suggest that female students' decisions to pursue or avoid law enforcement careers are shaped more by the meanings they attribute to the work than by demographics or external factors. Students motivated by relational service may choose not to enter law enforcement not because of a lack of interest in criminal justice, but because they perceive policing as inconsistent with their service-oriented values. In contrast, those who identify with occupational identity may be drawn to law enforcement because they resonate with the symbolic authority and distinctiveness of the sworn officer role. Understanding these motivational patterns has direct implications for how agencies and academic programs design recruitment messaging and curricula targeting women.

METHODS

Data

Data are from surveys administered to students enrolled in criminal justice programs in the United

States between January and December 2020. The survey was primarily based on Krimmel and Tartaro's (1999) survey of career and major decision-making; additional questions were included to gather information on students' demographics, employment, and career characteristics. Data collection occurred in three stages with approval from the University Institutional Review Boards. The survey was administered at three universities and online via social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. A total of 713 surveys were completed; only surveys completed by female students with full responses related to the study's research question were retained. The final sample size for this study was 292¹²³.

Historical Context of Data Collection

Data were collected between January and December 2020, a period of unusual disruption to policing and public life. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped law enforcement's operating conditions and public image, exposing officers to elevated stress, health risks, and competing demands (Lum *et al.*, 2023). In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd set off a sustained and internationally visible debate over use of force and the role of police, extending a dynamic that earlier research had already linked to reduced willingness to enter policing (Morrow *et al.*, 2019). Although these events centered on the United States, their effects reached well beyond it. Many students in this sample were working in or preparing to enter the field as these conditions unfolded, so their reported career intentions may reflect that moment in ways pre-pandemic data would not. Even so, the climate did not uniformly dampen interest; Walters *et al.* (2022) found that excitement-based motivations remained stable across pre- and post-Floyd cohorts.

This timing carries two implications for interpretation. First, the relatively low rate of law enforcement career intent in this sample (31.8%) may partly reflect the conditions of 2020 rather than stable, long-term preferences, and replication in a calmer period would help establish whether the rate is

¹Using Lipsey and Wilson's (2001) guidelines, a logistic regression power analysis indicated that the minimum sample size to yield a statistical power of at least .8 with an alpha of .05 and a medium effect size (odds ratio = 1.72) is 177 (Intellectus Statistics, 2022).

²Two clarifications about the sample are warranted. First, the full survey file also contained male respondents and homeland security majors; both were excluded from this particular analysis.

³The same survey was also administered concurrently to students majoring in homeland security; findings from that subsample are reported separately in Basham (2021) and are not included in the present analysis.

anomalous or enduring. Second, the period offers a useful test of which motivations hold up under public scrutiny: that occupational identity remained a positive predictor suggests it serves as a relatively stable motivational foundation. Future research should examine whether these patterns recur in post-pandemic samples and whether responses gathered before versus after May 2020 differ.

This study does not include response date as a covariate; as such, the information above should be interpreted as contextual framing rather than as an empirically tested component of the analysis. If response date were available, a pre- and post-May 2020 comparison, similar to that employed by Walters *et al.* (2022) for excitement-based motivations, would have permitted testing of differences across the pay/security, service, and identity scales, as well as the career-intent outcome. Additionally, because the sample consists of students already enrolled in criminal justice programs, some of whom may be near program completion, career intentions may reflect prior career goals and thus be less sensitive to contemporaneous shifts in public sentiment. Because the sample was collected entirely within the United States during a period of heightened public scrutiny of policing, the findings should also be interpreted as temporally and contextually bounded. The observed patterns may not generalize to other historical periods or sociopolitical contexts.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable examines female students' intent to pursue a career in law enforcement. The survey asked: "In which area of the criminal justice system do you intend to seek/maintain employment?" Categorical responses included law enforcement, corrections, and probation, among others. A dichotomous variable was created: those who selected law enforcement were coded "1," and those who selected any other category or noted that they did not intend to work in the criminal justice system were coded "0."

Independent Variables

While numerous previous studies have used Krimmel and Tartaro's (1999) survey to examine motivating factors for students to pursue careers in criminal justice, they have considered the items individually. Rather, we use these items to conceptualize the overarching factors that influence

career decision-making. Using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), three scales were identified and constructed to measure the independent variables of career motivation.

The first measure, *pay & security*, was created from three items to predict the influence of job pay and job security on students' decision to work in law enforcement ($\alpha = .830$). The second measure, *service*, was created from four items to predict the influence of service-oriented attitudes on students' desire to work in law enforcement ($\alpha = .755$). The third measure, *occupational identity*, was created from three items to measure the influence of job-specific identity items on students' motivation to work in law enforcement ($\alpha = .785$).

Control Variables

To assess student age, they were asked, "What is your age, in years?" This was coded as a continuous variable. The survey asked students to identify their race/ethnicity, with eight options: White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American/Indian, Mixed Race, Other. Due to low representation across categories, the variable was transformed into four categories: White/Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, and Other. White/Caucasian was the referent group.

To assess the influence of family pressures, students were asked about their marital status and whether they had children. For marital status, the never-married group was the referent group. The survey asked, "Do you have children?" This was a dichotomous variable, Yes/No. No was the reference group.

Finally, to identify the role of political ideology in decisions to pursue a career in law enforcement, the survey asked, "What is your political affiliation?" Four options were provided: Democrat, Republican, Independent, or No preference/not politically affiliated. Republicans were the referent group.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the study variables. For the dependent variable, law enforcement career, the sample included 292 female students. Fewer than half (31.8%) of the students reported intending to pursue a career in law enforcement.

Table 1: Univariate Statistics n=292

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	Mean	Range
<i>Career</i>				
Law Enforcement	93	31.8		
Not Law Enforcement	199	68.2		
<i>Pay & Security Scale</i>			12.86	3-15
<i>Service Scale</i>			18.49	4-20
<i>Occupational Identity Scale</i>			9.43	3-15
<i>Age</i>			29.36	18-72
<i>Race</i>				
White	210	71.9		
Black	36	12.3		
Hispanic	28	9.6		
Other	18	6.2		
Asian	3	1.0		
Native American/Indian	1	0.3		
Multiple Races	9	3.1		
Other	5	1.7		
<i>Marital Status</i>				
Never been married	168	57.5		
Currently/have been married	124	42.5		
<i>Children</i>				
No	174	59.6		
Yes	118	40.4		
<i>Political Affiliation</i>				
Democrat	52	17.8		
Republican	126	43.2		
Independent	47	16.1		
No preference/Not affiliated	67	22.9		

Five variables were used to control for student characteristics: race, age, marital status, child status, and political affiliation. The majority (71.9%) of the students were White ($n=210$); 12.3% ($n=36$) were Black; 28 students (9.6%) were Hispanic; and 18 students (6.2%) were in the Other category. The Other race category includes Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Native American/Indian, multiple races, and other race, and was combined into a single category for analytical reasons. See Table 1 for the distribution for the Other category.

In terms of age, students reported an average age of 29.36 with a range of 18 to 72 years. It is important to note that, as this sample represents a variety of institutional types (online, face-to-face, private, and

public), it shows greater representation of older or non-traditional students. Most students reported never having been married ($n=168$; 57.5%). The majority of students also reported not having children (59.6%, $n=174$). Most students reported identifying with the Republican Party (43.2%, $n=126$), followed by 17.8% who identified with the Democratic Party ($n=52$), and 16.1% who identified with the Independent Party ($n=47$). Another 22.9% reported no political preference ($n=67$).

For the EFA, principal component analysis was used with Promax rotation. See Table 2 for the EFA results. The scales satisfy the discriminant validity test, as the between-scale correlation of .26 was below the 0.70 threshold. Principal components extraction was

Table 2: Factor Loadings for Career Motivation Scales

Scale 1: Pay & Security Scale ($\alpha = .830$)	
I want to make a decent salary.	.823
I seek a secure position.	.898
I seek a position with benefits.	.848
Scale 2: Service Scale ($\alpha = .755$)	
I seek a position where I can help people solve problems.	.823
I seek a position where I can protect the Constitution.	.695
I seek a position where I can protect people from oppression.	.862
I seek a position where members are treated equally.	.652
Scale 3: Identity Scale ($\alpha = .785$)	
I want to arrest bad guys.	.764
I seek a position where I can wear a uniform.	.841
I seek a position where I can carry a gun.	.885

employed to reduce a modest set of items ($k=10$) into composite scores for subsequent regression analyses, rather than to model latent common variance. An eigenvalue-greater-than-one criterion guided factor retention, yielding a three-component solution (Table 2) with eigenvalues of 3.40, 1.90, and 1.64; the next eigenvalue was 0.61. Together, the retained components accounted for 69.5% of the total variance.

Sampling adequacy and inter-item correlations were assessed prior to extraction. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure indicated acceptable sampling adequacy ($KMO = .75$), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(45) = 1109.45, p < .001$), supporting the suitability of the data for dimension reduction. Communalities for the retained three-component solution ranged from .55 to .84. The composite measures entered into the regression models (Table 3) were regression-based factor scores derived from the Promax-rotated three-component solution (standardized with $M = 0, SD = 1$). These differ from the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1, which report unit-weighted sums of the raw items to aid interpretability.

The analysis assessed the research question: *What factors influence female criminal justice students' intent to pursue a career in law enforcement?* The dependent variable, students' intent to pursue a law enforcement career, was regressed on 12 variables (See Table 3).

All three independent variables were significant factors in the desire to work in law enforcement. For the first factor, *pay and security*, female students have lower odds (.638) of seeking law enforcement positions

($b = -.449, SE = .144, p < .01$). Interestingly, students who place higher values on jobs with *service* emphasis also have lower odds (.706) of seeking law enforcement careers ($b = -.348, SE = .163, p < .05$). Finally, considering the *identity* scale, female criminal justice students who reported high scores on tangible occupational identity items have higher odds (2.240) of reporting intent to pursue a career in law enforcement ($b = .807, SE = .176, p < .001$). Except for the small "Other" race category ($b = -2.099, OR = 0.123, p = .05$), which warrants caution given its limited size ($n = 18$), none of the student demographics (age, race, marital status, child status, or political affiliation) were significant predictors of female criminal justice students' intent to work in law enforcement.

To contextualize the substantive, rather than just statistical, magnitude of these effects, the identity coefficient ($OR = 2.240$) indicates that a one-standard-deviation increase in the standardized identity factor score is associated with a 124% increase in the odds of intending to pursue law enforcement, holding other variables constant. In comparison, a one-standard deviation increase in the pay and security factor score corresponds to a 36.2% decrease in the odds, while a similar increase in the service factor score is associated with a 29.4% decrease in the odds. Thus, the identity factor represents the strongest predictor among the three motivational scales in both practical and statistical terms.

Overall model fit statistics indicate moderate explanatory power: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .24$ (Cox and Snell $R^2 = .17$), with -2 Log Likelihood = 310.48; and a significant model chi-square ($\chi^2(12) = 54.94, p < .001$).

Table 3: Binary Logistic Regression (n=292)

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp(<i>b</i>)
Pay & Security Factor	-.449**	.144	.638
Service Factor	-.348*	.163	.706
Identity Factor	.807***	.176	2.240
Age	.010	.020	1.010
Race: Black	.351	.504	1.420
Race: Hispanic	-.265	.496	.767
Race: Other	-2.099*	1.070	.123
Marital Status	.259	.413	.772
Child Status	-.254	.427	.775
Democrat	-.867	.518	.420
Independent	.340	.406	1.405
No Political Preference	-.083	.378	.920
Constant	-1.045	.545	.352

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The model correctly classified 71.9% of cases, with sensitivity of 34.4% and specificity of 89.4%, compared to a baseline accuracy of 68.2% obtained by predicting the modal (non-law-enforcement) category.

DISCUSSION

The results show three statistically significant associations in this sample of female criminal justice students. Higher scores on the occupational identity scale were associated with greater odds of intending to pursue a law enforcement career, while higher scores on the service and pay/security scales were associated with lower odds of that intent.

The pay and security factor was the strongest negative predictor of intent to pursue a law enforcement career ($OR = .638$, $p < .01$). Students who placed greater importance on salary, benefits, and job stability were less likely to report an intention to enter law enforcement. This is inconsistent with the common assumption that compensation and stability automatically draw students toward policing, the way it is typically marketed. Recruiters and earlier studies alike have treated pay and security as features that draw people toward a policing career rather than reasons to look elsewhere (Courtright & Mackey, 2004; Foley *et al.*, 2008; Lester, 1983). Here the relationship ran the other way. One reason may be that students who care most about financial stability also tend to compare jobs closely, and policing carries costs that competing public-sector work often does not, including

physical risk, rotating shifts, and, in 2020, sustained public criticism of the field (Den Houter *et al.*, 2023). A second reason may be supply. Secure, benefit-bearing jobs have become easier to find outside policing, which chips away at whatever financial edge the work once held.

The service finding points in a similar direction. Students with stronger service-oriented motivation were less likely to intend to pursue a career in law enforcement. Female students with a strong desire to serve others and help their communities are less likely to want to become police officers, suggesting that people who choose a law enforcement career are less likely to be motivated by serving others. Therefore, female students who placed greater value on serving others through problem-solving, protection, upholding constitutional rights, and promoting equality were more likely to choose a different career path within criminal justice. This outcome is the opposite of the characterization of policing as a service profession, and it raises questions about the dissonance between female students' expectations and perceived realities of agency.

This finding may be understood as a form of role-goal misalignment. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to prioritize service-oriented motivation for entering the criminal justice field (Courtright & Mackey, 2004; Golden, 1982). If women enter criminal justice programs primarily because they want to help people and protect vulnerable populations,

but they do not consider law enforcement, particularly patrol-based policing, as the most direct vehicle for fulfilling those goals, they may self-select into other subsectors of criminal justice work. Roles in victim advocacy, community corrections, social work, juvenile justice, or rehabilitative programming may be perceived as more congruent with a service orientation than the enforcement and order-maintenance functions that dominate policing's public image.

This pattern is consistent with findings from a parallel sample of homeland security majors surveyed using the same adapted survey during the same data collection period. Basham (2021) found that the overwhelming majority of homeland security students intended to work specifically within the homeland security field, most commonly in counterterrorism and emergency management, rather than in law enforcement; students in that sample also rated service- and equity-oriented items (helping people solve problems, protecting the Constitution, protecting people from oppression) among their highest-rated motivations for pursuing a homeland security career. Taken together, the two samples suggest that service- and equity-motivated students within the broader criminal justice and homeland security umbrella do not necessarily abandon those values when they opt out of law enforcement; rather, they may be directing them toward adjacent fields, such as homeland security or emergency management, that they perceive as more directly aligned with a service orientation.

Two additional explanations, which are not mutually exclusive with role-goal misalignment, warrant consideration. First, the observed negative association may reflect a gap in realistic job preview. Students with strong service orientations may underestimate the extent to which contemporary patrol work involves crisis intervention, victim engagement, and problem-solving. As a result, their initial career preferences may shift as they gain exposure to the full scope of policing tasks. Under this interpretation, the pattern observed here reflects a perception gap rather than a stable value conflict and may attenuate with greater curricular or field-based exposure.

Second, the timing of data collection, during the months immediately following the killing of George Floyd, may have shaped responses. Students with strong service orientations who place particular emphasis on constitutional protections and equitable treatment may have been especially responsive to heightened public scrutiny and to use-of-force

controversies. This context may have led some to view law enforcement as misaligned with their values, at least temporarily. Distinguishing between a stable, value-based aversion to policing and a period-specific reaction to the sociopolitical climate of 2020 will require replication in different historical contexts.

This interpretation has important implications for law enforcement recruitment. If police departments are struggling to recruit women, then their strategic marketing plans may be exacerbating the problem. Departments that do not associate policing with service values may be counterproductive for female recruitment. However, agencies that emphasize community problem-solving, crisis intervention, victim services, school resource programming, and restorative justice partnerships, the dimensions of modern policing that most directly correspond to service motivations, may be better positioned to attract female applicants who are currently self-selecting out of the applicant pool. This finding thus lends empirical support to community-oriented policing models not only as an effective public safety strategy but as a mechanism for diversifying the sworn officer workforce.

The occupational identity scale used in this study, comprising items measuring the desire to arrest criminal suspects, carry a weapon, and wear a uniform, was the strongest positive association of female students' intent to pursue a law enforcement career. While this finding is intuitive on its face, it merits a more critical examination. These three items are not merely neutral descriptions of job tasks; they collectively reflect a historically masculinized construction of the police officer role rooted in physical authority, coercive power, and martial symbolism (Rabe-Hemp, 2008).

The fact that female students who strongly identify with these symbols are more likely to express intent to pursue a law enforcement career does not simply indicate a preference for particular job tasks; it may reflect the degree to which those students have internalized, or are willing to perform, the dominant masculine identity of policing. Research on women in law enforcement has long documented the pressure female officers face to demonstrate toughness and conform to masculine norms to be accepted as legitimate within police culture (Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Female officers who adopt these norms may achieve greater organizational acceptance but also report higher rates of identity conflict and burnout than those who pursue more community-oriented styles of policing (Rabe-Hemp,

2008). To the extent that the Identity scale captures alignment with the masculinized archetype of policing, the finding that it predicts female career intent may be interpreted not only as motivational but as potentially screening out women whose preferred style of law enforcement work, relationship-based, de-escalation-focused, community-embedded, is not reflected in the symbolic content of the scale.

This interpretation is subject to an important measurement limitation. The three items comprising the identity scale, desire to arrest suspects, wear a uniform, and carry a weapon, were originally developed by Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) to capture general attraction to the tangible, role-defining features of sworn policing, rather than attraction to a specifically masculinized image. As such, the present analysis cannot fully distinguish between these possibilities. High scores may reflect attraction to the authority and symbolic features of policing in a gender-neutral sense, to a masculinized construction of that authority, or to both simultaneously.

Because the scale does not include items that systematically vary the gendered framing of these role features, for example, by contrasting authority-based items with parallel items emphasizing professional competence or community standing, the observed relationship between identity and career intent is consistent with, but does not independently confirm, a masculinized-identity interpretation. Future research should refine the measurement of occupational identity to better disentangle general attraction to policing from attraction to specifically masculinized forms of its symbolic content.

Future research should examine whether the predictive relationship between identity, motivation, and law enforcement career intent differs between women who endorse more community-oriented versus enforcement-oriented policing philosophies, and whether women who enter law enforcement for identity-based reasons versus service-based reasons experience different career trajectories, retention rates, and organizational outcomes. Critically, law enforcement agencies and criminal justice programs that aspire to expand the representation of women should consider whether their recruitment materials, training environments, and organizational cultures project a conception of policing that is accessible and appealing to service-motivated women, not only to those who have already adopted the enforcement-identity framework.

Implications for Recruitment Policy

The recommendations that follow vary in their empirical support. The caution regarding identity- and security-focused recruitment messaging is directly supported by the regression results. Specifically, because pay/security and service orientations were negatively associated with law enforcement intent, while identity was positively associated, recruitment strategies that emphasize compensation or enforcement-oriented symbolism may be less effective in attracting a broad pool of prospective female applicants. By contrast, the curricular and organizational recommendations that follow are not directly tested within this study's cross-sectional, intent-based design. Instead, they extend the observed patterns related to identity and service motivations by drawing on prior qualitative and organizational research on women in policing (e.g., Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rabe-Hemp, 2008). These recommendations should therefore be interpreted as theoretically grounded and literature-informed extensions, rather than as findings that can be established by the present data alone.

Taken together, the findings of this study have specific, actionable implications for law enforcement recruitment efforts targeting female candidates. First, agencies should critically audit the language and imagery used in recruitment campaigns. If those campaigns center on weapons, tactical gear, crime-fighting, and authority, they may appeal primarily to the identity-motivated segment of female students while failing to reach the larger service-motivated segment. Campaigns that feature community liaison work, victim support, crisis intervention, and collaborative problem-solving with community partners may broaden the appeal of law enforcement careers to service-oriented female applicants. The same caution applies to pay-based appeals. Because security-motivated women were among the least likely to intend to enter policing, campaigns that lead with salary and benefits risk concentrating effort on an audience already disinclined to apply.

Second, criminal justice programs at universities and colleges play an important intermediary role in shaping students' perceptions of what law enforcement work entails. Faculty can assist recruitment efforts by designing curricula that expose students, particularly female students, to the full range of policing functions, including those most aligned with service values. Guest speakers, internship opportunities, and scenario-based learning that center on community-oriented policing practices may help bridge the perceived gap between

service motivation and intent to pursue a law enforcement career.

Third, the findings suggest that initiatives such as 30x30, which aim to increase female representation in policing, should be accompanied by structural changes within agencies, not only recruitment campaigns. If women who enter law enforcement for service-oriented reasons face organizational cultures that devalue or marginalize service-oriented policing styles, recruitment gains are likely to be eroded by elevated attrition. Sustainable diversification requires both expanding the pipeline and transforming the organizational environment into which women are recruited. This attrition mechanism is not measured in the present study, which captures only pre-entry career intent, and should be treated as a hypothesis for future longitudinal research rather than as a demonstrated outcome.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study employed a multi-modal data collection strategy that included both on-campus administration at three universities and online recruitment through social media platforms, specifically Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. While this approach enhanced geographic and institutional diversity and facilitated the inclusion of non-traditional students who may not be enrolled in on-campus programs, it also introduces meaningful potential for self-selection bias that warrants acknowledgment.

Additionally, recruiting through online platforms increases the risk of duplicate responses, response fraud, or participation by individuals who do not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., female students enrolled in criminal justice programs). While the survey's completion and filtering procedures may have mitigated some of these risks, they cannot fully eliminate them in an open online survey environment. Future research should consider probability-based sampling designs, such as stratified random sampling from institutional enrollment records, to produce more representative estimates of career motivation among female criminal justice students.

The racial composition of the sample limits the generalizability of race-stratified findings, particularly those involving comparisons between smaller racial and ethnic subgroups. The relatively small numbers of Black, Hispanic, and Other Race students constrain the statistical power to detect race-based differences in motivational profiles or career intent. This is an especially consequential limitation given that the

diversification of law enforcement, including gender and racial diversity, is a central policy concern motivating this research. Research consistently documents that the motivational and experiential pathways into policing differ across racial and ethnic groups (Ermer, 1978; Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003; Watt, 2024), and the present study's sample is not sufficiently diverse to draw confident conclusions about these differences. Future research should employ targeted sampling strategies to oversample female students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, enabling more nuanced and statistically reliable comparisons across groups. Studies conducted at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and other minority-serving institutions would be particularly valuable for this purpose.

Finally, the sample is drawn entirely from criminal justice students enrolled at institutions in the United States, and the survey items, career categories, and policing symbolism examined here (e.g., wearing a uniform, carrying a weapon, arrest authority) reflect the specific structure and cultural meaning of American law enforcement. Policing is organized, trained, armed, and publicly regarded differently across countries, and the relative salience of service, security, and identity motivations documented here should not be assumed to generalize beyond the U.S. context without direct testing in other national or cross-cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

If law enforcement agencies are expected to increase female representation, it is essential to understand the factors that motivate or deter women from pursuing law enforcement as a career. This study offers empirical insights into the influencing factors for women's choices. Institutions of higher education, vocational institutions, and recruiters may consider findings from this study to better understand these motivations and strategize ways to increase the representation of women in the field. Utilizing exploratory factor analysis, this research indicates that occupational identity is the most significant predictor of a woman's choice to work in the field. While pay, security, and service orientation also remained statistically significant, these findings may be particularly useful for agencies in deciding where, when, and how to market for recruiting purposes.

FUNDING STATEMENT

The research received no specific grant from any funding agency, whether public, commercial, or not-for-profit.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The authors declare no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

REFERENCES

- Basham, S. L. (2021). Exploring the major and career decisions of homeland security students. *College of Safety & Emergency Services Academic Journal*. <https://csejournal.columbiasouthern.edu/exploring-the-major-and-career-decisions-of-homeland-security-students/>
- Carter, D., & Sapp, A. (1990). The evolution of higher education in law enforcement: Preliminary findings from a national study. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 1(1), 59-84
- Carter, D., Sapp, A., & Stephens, D. (1989). *The state of police education: Policy direction for the 21st century*. Police Executive Research Forum.
- Courtright, K. E., & Mackey, D. A. (2004). Job desirability among criminal justice majors: Exploring relationships between personal characteristics and occupational attractiveness. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 15(2), 311-326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511250400086001>
- Dantzker, M. L. (2003). Criminal justice: Why major, employment goals, and perceptions of situations: An exploratory examination among criminal justice students. *Police Forum*, 12(1), 1-9.
- DeMarie, D., & Aloise-Young, P. A. (2003). College students' interest in their major. *College Student Journal*, 37(3), 462-469.
- Den Houter, K. M., Chatterjee, D., Ryan, A. M., & Liebler, J. (2023). Policing is not for me: Repelling factors implicated in vocational choice elimination. *Policing and Society*, 33(1), 32-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2022.2042285>
- Díaz, V. M., & Núño, L. E. (2021). Women and policing: An assessment of factors related to the likelihood of pursuing a career as a police officer. *Police Quarterly*, 24(4), 465-485.
- Ermer, V. B. (1978). Recruitment of female police officers in New York City. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 6(3), 233-246.
- Fitzgerald, G. (1989). Report of a commission of inquiry into possible illegal activities and associated police misconduct. *Queensland Government Printer*.
- Foley, P. F., Guarneri, C., & Kelly, M. F. (2008). Reasons for choosing a police career: Changes over two decades. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 10(1), 2-8.
- Golden, K. (1982). Women in criminal justice: Occupational interests. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 10(2), 147-152. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352\(82\)90005-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352(82)90005-8)
- Guller, I. (1972). Higher education and policemen: Attitudinal differences between freshman and senior police-college Students. *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science*, 63(3), 396-401.
- Hilal, S., & Densley, J. D. (2013). Higher education and local law enforcement. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*.
- Intellectus Statistics. (2022). Intellectus Statistics [Online computer software]. <http://analyze.intellectusstatistics.com/>
- Johnson, T. L., Johnson, N. R., & Seigny, E. L. (2022). Supplemental material for the college shield: Examining the role of officer education in violent police encounters. *Psychology of Violence*, 12(4), 260-269. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000407>
- Kaminski, R. J. (1993). Police minority recruitment: Predicting who will say yes to an offer for a job as a cop. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 21(4), 395-409.
- Krimmel, J. T., & Tartaro, C. (1999). Career choices and characteristics of criminal justice undergraduates. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 10(2), 277-289.
- Lester, D. (1983). Why do people become police officers: A study of reasons and their predictions of success. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 11(2), 170-174.
- Li, Y., Luo, F., Carey, M. T., & Brown, B. (2021). The desirability of law enforcement careers among college students in a Hispanic community. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 32(2), 234-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2021.1893774>
- Lipsey, M. W., & Wilson, D. B. (2001). The way in which intervention studies have "personality" and why it is important to meta-analysis. *Evaluation & the health professions*, 24(3), 236-254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016327870102400302>
- Lum, C., Maupin, C., & Stoltz, M. (2023). The supply and demand shifts in policing at the start of the pandemic: A national multi-wave survey of the impacts of COVID-19 on American law enforcement. *Police Quarterly*, 26(4), 495-519.
- Morrow, W. J., Vickovic, S. G., Dario, L. M., & Shjarback, J. A. (2019). Examining the Ferguson Effect on College Students' Motivation to Become Police Officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 30(4), 585-605. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2019.1619793>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2025a). Associate's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by sex of student and field of study: Academic years 2011-12 through 2021-22. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_321.10.asp
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2025b). Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected academic years, 1970-71 through 2021-22. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_322.10.asp
- NYU School of Law. (2025). 30x30. Advancing and Supporting Women in Policing. The Policing Project. <https://30x30initiative.org/>
- Paoline III, E. A., & Terrill, W. (2007). Police education, experience, and the use of force. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34(2), 179-196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854806290239>
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (2005). How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research. *Jossey-Bass*.
- Prokos, A., & Padavic, I. (2002). 'There oughtta be a law against bitches': Masculinity lessons in police academy training. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 9, 439-459. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00168>
- Rabe-Hemp, C. E. (2008). Female officers and the ethic of care: Does officer gender impact police behaviors?. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36(5), 426-434. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2008.07.001>
- Ridener, R., Kuehn, S., & Scott, P. W. (2020). Why do criminology and criminal justice students choose their major? An examination of parental, personality, and other individual characteristics. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 31(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2019.1650085>
- Roberg, R. R. (1978). Analysis of the relationships among higher education belief systems and job performance of patrol officers. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 6(3), 336-344.
- Simpson, J. C. (2001). Segregated by subject: Racial differences in factors influencing academic major between European Americans, Asian Americans, and African, Hispanic, and

- Native Americans. *Journal of Higher Education*, 72(1), 63–100.
- Stringer, E. C., DeFeo, S., Munoz Arias, G., & Murphy, J. (2023). The impact of gender on social support for criminal justice careers. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 34(2), 231–249.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2022.2079145>
- Stringer, E. C., & Murphy, J. (2020). Major decisions and career attractiveness among criminal justice students. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 21(2), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2020.1814829>
- Tartaro, C., & Krimmel, J. T. (2003). The effect of race on criminal justice students' career choices. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 28(1), 109–124.
- Wallace, L. N. (2023). Criminal justice students' perceptions of their future careers. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 34(2), 169–184.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2022.2068631>
- Walters, G. D., Runell, L., & Kremser, J. (2022). Career aspirations, influences, and motives in undergraduate criminal justice majors: A comparison of two student cohorts assessed seven years apart. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 33(4), 605–619.
<https://doi-org/10.1080/10511253.2022.2025875>
- Watt, B. (2024). *A study of why black students would want to major in criminal justice* (Order No. 30995894). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (3060272406).
- Worden, R. E. (1990). A badge and a baccalaureate: Policies, hypotheses, and further evidence. *Justice Quarterly*, 7(3), 565–592.
- Yancey-Bragg, N. (2025). Cities hope to attract more police officers by cutting education requirements. *USA Today*.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2025/08/10/police-jobs-college-requirements/85324780007/>
- Yim, Y. (2009). Girls, why do you want to become police officers? Career goals/choices among criminal justice undergraduates. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 19(2), 120–136.

Received on 22-05-2026

Accepted on 25-06-2026

Published on 25-07-2026

<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2026.15.12>© 2026 Basham *et al.*

This is an open-access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.