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For decades starting around the late 1980s police in the media have had a glorified image. Shows like COPS, Live PD, law & order, and NYPD Blue portrayed police as the “Good Guys” with an uncritical lens of the behavior of real police. This has led to many Americans to have biased or altered opinions on things such as race, gender and geography as well as a misconception of how effective police are in reality. Film and television, both fiction and nonfiction about law enforcement glorifying police officers, has set an unrealistic expectation and misunderstanding of how law enforcement should work in the United States.

COPS was one of the longest running TV shows having 33 seasons starting in 1989. The show's appeal was its claim of real cops in the line of duty and was outrageously cheap to make.

“Cops producers found they could make an episode for \$200k, about a third of the typical cost of a situational comedy at that time” (Doyle)

The Fox network also found that episodes remained relevant. They did not age like news programs and sitcoms so they were perfect for constant reruns even while new episodes would be produced. This led to lots of episodes being aired in a prime time and day time slots during the era of Reagan's to H.W. Bush to Clinton's tough on crime policies. These policies were criticized for its creation of a significant racial disparity in prison populations. COPS was criticized much later in the show's run just before its cancellation. The show was known for filming in very low income areas and there is a

racial disparity (Dominion), most of the arrests in the show are of black people. Enough to include in the drinking games about the show to drink when a caucasian is arrested “In our eight hours of programming, we noted the presence of 50 police officers and 61 perpetrators. The majority of the characters shown were white (62% of all characters on the show) and most of these characters (67%) were portrayed as police officers. Among our nonwhite characters on COPS, the vast majority (90%) were shown as crime perpetrators. Virtually all (93%) of the black and Hispanic (83%) characters on these episodes were offenders. “ (Dominion University 8)

COPs always includes the officers they film with telling a story of how they became a police officer which is always personal and uplifting yet the show never includes police casually communicating with each other or their superiors. COPS while sterilized at least shows unintentionally glaring issues with our police and this has had an effect on how viewers view both police and minorities. A study done by Kathleen Curry at University of Delaware found that viewers who watch episodes of COPS felt that they were informative and valid representations of race, gender and different socioeconomic status than their own and did not feel the need to experience these in reality to make their own opinions.

“ Focus group data shored up some pathways of the model, revealing that even in discussion format respondents acknowledged that the violent content of the program was a meaningful attraction factor. Most of the discussants said that the program did not affect their fear of crime but rather desensitized them to violence and attributed crime to neighborhoods and social classes of which they were not a part. Thus, without leaving

the safety of their living room their curiosity to see other walks of life could be satisfied.”  
(Curry 11)

It is not just the programs that base themselves in reality or use footage of real police that perpetuate this trend. Shows like Law & Order and NYPD Blue also perpetuate a bias against race, gender and geography. Following a very similar trend as to COPS despite being completely fabricated situations and following a script. Fictional shows are in a position to break away from a stereotype but instead follow the ones that have been prevalent in American culture for over a century.

“On "Law & Order," African Americans have a higher ratio of handcuffed offender to offender (with handcuffed offenders appearing more dangerous) offender to victim, and offender to attorney than their White counterparts. In four of these cases for Blacks and seven of these cases for Hispanics, minorities are at least twice as likely to be shown as offenders than in other roles than their White counterparts.” (Eschholz Mallard Flynn 9)

Both of these shows and Law & Orders Spin offs take place in New York City and since every episode of these shows follows detectives solving a violent crime of either rape or murder. The shows make the city seem much more violent than reality.

““NYPD Blue” and “Law & Order,” compared to Uniform Crime Reports. Both “NYPD Blue” (79%) and “Law & Order” (92%) tremendously exaggerate both the number and the relative proportion of homicides in New York City (.22%), compared to actual crime report data.” (Eschholz Mallard Flynn 10)

This data uses Uniform Crime Report from the FBI statistics from 1998 to compare the crimes investigated by the detectives in the shows. The majority being violent in nature, particularly homicide. The shows also show the police as a very

efficient force of solving crime, yet they consistently violate the constitution to do so.

While real police have been known to violate the constitution as they are either ignorant of it or like the characters in these shows view it as an obstacle to get justice.

“According to this franchise, expedience and efficiency are the keys to keeping citizens safe.<sup>31</sup> Detectives routinely harass and physically abuse suspects and skirt the bounds of constitutionality in their applications for warrants, their interrogations and their investigative practices” (Schneiderman 7)

Dramatic police shows all have this as a running theme, rights and rules are an obstacle to work around and not something to protect the arrested from abuse. This behavior is always justified through the concept of true justice or ends justify means. It is acceptable to forget to read miranda rights, to be aggressive or brutalize those being arrested or verbally abused with profanities and slurs. These tactics get results for the police in these shows unfortunately.

““NYPD Blue” normally concludes with the arrest of the “bad guy”, and “Law & Order” usually ends with a criminal conviction in court accompanied by a long incarceration sentence. Using the 1999 Uniform Crime Reports, crimes known to police and arrest data, the average clearance rate for violent crimes is 29% [3]. “NYPD Blue” had a phenomenal 78% arrest rate, and “Law & Order” had a 61% conviction rate.” (Eschholz Mallard Flynn 12).

Police in reality have nowhere near this level of arresting and conviction. According to the Cold Case Project organization on average in the US only 58% of homicide are considered solved from 1995-2015 and Pew Research center also from 1995-2015 found that 46% of violent crime including homicide, rape, and assault are

considered solved, solved meaning there has been an arrest and a conviction. This means most violent crime in the United States goes unsolved and with the above quotes 29% only being from 1999 compared to 20 years of data the amount of violent crime solved still has not reached the levels of shows about police. A depiction showing policing as much more effective at catching, punishing criminals and depicting police brutality as being justified than what reality shows have had an impact on how people view police and their actions has had a real out effect on the viewers, Especially the ones who do not travel to the places where these shows take place. (Eschholz Mallard Flynn). Much of television influences the American people or reinforces their beliefs, this leads to a blurred line of reality when depicting policing as either real or dramatized. Many can see the line clearly, many cannot. When a cop drama uses a real crime as inspiration for an episode people mistake the dramatization for reality leading to a severe misunderstanding with real world consequences.

Television shows depicting police glorify them to an impossible expectation. The stereotypes they perpetuate have had an effect on how viewers observe the world around them. Viewers have had their outlook on race, gender, geography and the efficiency of policing influenced by these shows for decades and if non-police have been influenced, police officers themselves have also likely been influenced by these shows. Media is a powerful tool when influencing a populace and it must be taken in consideration when entertainment has real world consequences.

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Link to Podcast

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Police and their unrealistic representation in television