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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS POLICE OFFICERS ON TWO-YEAR COLLEGE CAMPUSES

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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS POLICE OFFICERS ON TWO-YEAR COLLEGE
CAMPUSES

by

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A Doctoral Project Submitted to,
the College of Education and Human Sciences
and the School of Education
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ABSTRACT

Campus law enforcement officers are a necessary component to the college environment. Over the last decade, law enforcement officers and their practices have been scrutinized nationally and have become the topic of a heated debate over the necessity of the profession. The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of campus police officers on two-year college campuses. Specifically, this study examined the students' understanding of the unique roles of campus police officers. Additionally, this study assessed students' trust in the abilities of campus police officers to provide a safe learning environment. Key results indicated that students lack an awareness of their own safety while on campus. Additionally, the participants differed in their understanding of the duties and responsibilities of campus police officers. This study identified the need for initiatives and programming to provide better opportunities for students and campus police officers to interact in positive, meaningful ways.

Keywords: campus police officers, law enforcement, student safety

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my wonderful family, who have supported me and sacrificed with me. To my mother, you have shown me hard work, dedication, and what it means to be a woman in the workforce. Your journey paved the way for me to reach and exceed any dream I ever had for myself. For this and many other things, I will forever be grateful for you. To my husband, the world of law enforcement became important to me because of you. I have witnessed you sacrifice yourself time and time again to make our lives better. Your love and support mean the world to me. You have given me the motivation to overcome every challenge in my way. I had a dream and your encouragement helped me realize it! And to my boys, my lovely, sweet, funny, rotten boys! I cannot thank you both enough for sharing the WiFi with me! I truly would not have been able to complete my coursework without you sacrificing your game time. You two are my reason for everything!

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The actions and necessity of police officers have been the subject of a national debate within the United States of America for many decades. Law enforcement, in general, remains one of the perceived causes of social injustice within the country. No agency, whether public or private, is excluded from the ongoing criticisms. College and university campus police departments have found themselves on the receiving end of many criticisms, specifically regarding their legitimacy as police officers. Jacobsen (2015) found that "students delegitimize the power of the campus police by raising the questions about their status as "real" police officers and highlighting that they overreact to the wrong types of behaviors, such as underage drinking" (p. 310). In addition to the perceptions that campus police are not real cops, students, faculty, and college communities question if the presence of a firearm-carrying officers actually create a save environment or if it negatively affects students. Hanes (2020) surveyed professors of Johns Hopkins University who argued improved student safety is not realized by an increased police presence; further arguing that the increased police presence provides an insecure environment for minorities.

Background

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) serves the George, Harrison, Jackson and Stone counties of Mississippi through ten campuses and/or centers. The college provides public safety services on seven of the ten sites. The remaining three sites are housed on military bases or private installations in which security is provided. Throughout the district, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College employs approximately 25 full-time campus police officers and 45 part-time campus police officers.

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Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College established a police force through Campus Police offices on January 23, 1971 (MGCCC, 2021b). At their August 6, 2008 meeting, the Executive Council of MGCCC voted to require all campus police officers be certified officers (MGCCC, 2008). Certified police officers differ from non-certified officers in significant ways. According to the Board on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Training (BLEOST), individuals must be eligible to attend and complete an accredited law enforcement training academy. To attend a law enforcement training academy, BLEOST requires individuals submit to a full criminal background check, hold a high school or equivalent diploma, be at least 21 years of age, and be a United States of America citizen. Additionally, individuals must be physical and mentally fit and be of good moral character. Academy cadets complete courses through the academy to expand their knowledge and skills on such topics as an introduction to the criminal justice system, to include police ethics, moral issues and police power, authority and discretion (BLEOST, 2019). Additional topics covered include human relations, firearms training, investigative practices, constitutional law, search and seizure, and laws of arrest.

The college's Campus Police departments perform a variety of law enforcement related duties. As a former non-certified department, MGCCC campus officers held no authority to uphold the laws of Mississippi and relied heavily on the surrounding municipalities to provide investigative support and response to criminal activity. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College campus police officers are now responsible for all facets of law enforcement on campus to include, but not limited to, maintaining order and investigating criminal activity. As certified law enforcement officers, campus police officers wear a standard police uniform with a bulletproof vest and carry both a handgun and a Taser.

The Campus Police departments on Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College campuses operate within a community policing philosophy. Engagement between students and campus police officers is encouraged and college practices require students to visit the department to obtain their college identification cards and parking decals. Campus police officers are integrated into the planning of campus events and remain visible during large events such as graduation or sporting events. They work closely with student organizations and often speak to groups of students. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College officers remain a constant presence around campus.

Statement of Problem

During the spring 2020 semester, students at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) were surveyed regarding their satisfaction level with the safety and security and rated their campuses higher than the national average. Specifically, students were asked to rate their satisfaction as it related to the safety and security on campus for all students (MGCCC, 2020). MGCCC students provided a mean average of 6.50 compared to the national mean average of 6.20 when asked if they felt their campus was safe and secure for all students. The 837 students surveyed rated the importance of safety on campus a mean average of 6.77 compared to the national average mean of 6.60. While the students rated the safety and security of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College campuses higher than the national benchmark, 228 of the 837 students surveyed did not provide a response to the question. The survey questions presented to students are too broad and do not capture the students' satisfaction with the level of safety provided on these campuses. Further, the questions do not provide students the ability to detail their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Additionally, the survey questions do not provide any indication of the student's relationship with campus police or their overall perceptions on the

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ability for campus police to keep them safe. In addition to the broadness of the survey, the campuses lack a stated initiative and plan to create greater engagement with students. Campus police officers have an opportunity to impact young individuals at an important phase in their lives. At the time of this study, the college was not measuring the officer's ability to do so. While crime levels on each campus and/or center are low at a cumulative number of 27 investigated offenses in 2019, to include three arrests for gun and/or drug violation, the factors to which the low number can be attributed remain unknown (MGCCC, 2020). The low crime level could stem from unreported offenses. If that is the case, the question emerges with respect to the possible reasons why students do not report these offenses.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the student perceptions of campus police officers on commuter and resident campuses of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. Specifically, the study investigated possible misconceptions that community college students may have regarding the role of campus police officers and their ability to provide a safe learning environment. Further, this study examined whether students were more comfortable or uncomfortable on a college campus that employs armed, law enforcement officers.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the student perspectives of the roles of campus police officers on MGCCC commuter and resident campuses?

2. How confident are MGCCC students in the abilities of campus police officers to provide a safe learning environment?

3. How safe do MGCCC students feel in the presence of campus police officers?

4. What are MGCCC student's beliefs and perceptions toward having a Campus Police department on campus?

Significance

This study of students' perceptions of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College Campus police officers was to provide findings that may potentially benefit students, campus police officers, and the college community as a whole. First, students can benefit from these findings by learning the roles and responsibilities of campus police officers. Further, this information assists students with establishing a connection with the Campus Police departments and the creation of an engagement program for officers and students. Students can also use these results to take a more active role in their safety, on and off campus. Secondly, these insights assist campus police officers in ensuring they are offering the best services to students. Campus police officers can use this information to implement initiatives to connect with students in a more significant way. The knowledge of this study should offer insight into the level of trust students have in the department and their likelihood to reach out to an officer when needed. Third, MGCCC can share and apply this knowledge to evaluate student relationships with other academic and support departments on campus. This study further provides Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College administrators invaluable information regarding the campus climate from a student perspective. This information could assist the college in determining where to focus marketing efforts to ensure potential students are well informed of campus safety and security services. Lastly, other institutions of higher learning can use these discoveries to address any deficits or shortcomings in their own campus communities.

Definition of Terms

Community policing. A collaboration between police departments, its agents and the community in which it protects. The purpose of the collaboration is to establish positive relationships with all members of the community. (Community Oriented Policing Services [COPS], 2014).

District. A noun used when referencing the college's four-county service area. District refers to the service area community and its members. (MGCCC, 2021a).

Law enforcement officer. For the purpose of this study, the following terms will be used interchangeably: campus police, law enforcement officer, police officer, officer. Law enforcement officer refers to certified officers only. (BLEOST, 2019).

Assumptions

Assumptions are aspects of the study that the researcher accepts to be true, or at least plausible. Explicit assumptions for this study include the researcher assuming that participants will provide honest answers. Specifically, the data collection process was based on the premise that students would openly share their experiences with and perspectives of campus police officers. Further, the researcher assumes that participants will have had prior interaction with a campus police officer, to include negative and/or positive interaction.

Delimitations

Delimitations represent choices made by the researcher to identify the scope and boundaries of the study. The researcher has chosen to limit the participant sample to resident students from one campus of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College and commuter students from a different campus of the same college. This boundary of focus on specific demographic on only two campuses allowed the researcher to gather rich and detailed accounts of student's experiences with campus police officers on their particular campus. Further, the researcher has

chosen to limit the sample to full-time students enrolled in one particular semester. By limiting

the scope to only full-time students within one particular semester, the researcher was able to

capture the experiences of students who attend colleges within the same local and national

environment.

Limitations

Limitations are conditions outside the control of the researcher. Limitations represent

weaknesses within the research design that may affect the findings of the study. Due to the

qualitative research design utilized, a small number of participants were interviewed. The views

and perspectives of this limited number of participants may not accurately represent the views of

a larger population. The perceptions of the study participants cannot be assumed to reflect those

of the entire student body. The study was performed during one semester of one academic year.

Results from other semesters in other years could potentially have produced different findings.

The researcher was unable to identify and interview students who had formal interactions or

disagreements with campus police officers and, consequently, the study's results may not reflect

the perceptions of all students.

Summary

This study attempted to identify the perceptions two-year college students have of the

campus police officers who serve their campuses. Specifically, student perspectives of the roles

and responsibilities of campus police officers constituted the prime focus of this research. The

study further sought to examine students' comfort level with attending a college with armed,

certified campus police officers. The study endeavored to evaluate the level of confidence

students have of the ability of law enforcement officers to create a safe learning environment.

Chapter Two presents the overview of the literature that relates to the necessity of campus police officers on college campuses and student perceptions of campus police.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter covers the relevant research and literature regarding campus police and their relationships with the students they serve. First, the current national climate regarding law enforcement agencies is detailed. Second, the institution of campus law enforcement services is discussed to allow the reader a better understanding of the history of campus police as well as the perceptions the campus community have of campus police departments. Further, the public opinion of law enforcement officers within communities is discussed. Next, college campus safety is examined, to include current statistics of campus crime and violence. Additionally, the reporting of campus crime statistics through the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act is explained. Finally, the importance of positive connections on campus is explored.

National Climate Regarding Law Enforcement

Throughout the last decade, national events have increased the divide between law enforcement officers and the public, specifically within minority communities. The officer-involved deaths of Philandro Castille, Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown created a national outcry for police reform and social justice in the nation. The public have demanded accountability of law enforcement officers who, by law, hold an extreme amount of power. During the summer of 2020, this public plea boiled over into a summer of national protests and riots following the officer-involved deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rashad Brooks. This civil and political unrest resulted in the deaths and injuries of many law enforcement officers.

Each year the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) releases data detailing the number of police officers killed during the act of felonious incidents. This report shows an increase in

slain officers during the years of civil unrest protests and riots. The FBI data shows an 89%

increase is the number of slain officers from 2013 to 2014, with 51 slain officers in 2014, the

same year of protests related to the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. In 2016, 66 law

enforcement officers were slain, a 61% increase from 2015 (FBI, 2017). The killings of

Philandro Castille, Alton Sterling, and Keith Lamont Scott resulted in widespread protests

against police the same year.

These tragedies, the perceived lack of justice, as well as the increased number of

individuals coming forward to tell their stories of unjust incidents involving law enforcement

officers have widen the distrust the American public feels for law enforcement as a whole. This

is no exception in the American higher education system, where acts of violence and disorder

have warranted the presence of law enforcement officers on campus. Colleges and universities

are aware of the national climate as it relates to law enforcement. Additionally, colleges and

universities are acutely aware of the dangers on campus and the expectations of students and

parents to provide a safe learning environment.

Campus Law Enforcement Services

Campus law enforcement exists for three functions: crime control, maintaining order, and

service. To achieve these functions, some institutions employ campus security, but many

colleges and universities have moved to certified police departments. Certified law enforcement

officers possess certain qualities and attributes that enable them to deal with an abundance of

situations. Campus police officers undergo the same training as municipal law enforcement

officers and carry weapons just the same. The campus community depends on their Campus

Police departments to maintain a safe learning environment, while the Campus Police

departments depend on a relationship with the campus community to achieve this goal. Data

have shown a significant, positive relationship between student evaluations of campus police legitimacy and the likelihood of crime reporting and cooperation with campus police (Aiello, 2020).

History of Campus Police

Campus police departments became most prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA), the need for campus law enforcement officers resulted from campus events surrounding the Vietnam War, the Kent State University shooting, and increased crime on college campuses (IACLEA, 2016). The Kent State University shooting occurred when the Ohio National Guard was deployed to the university to bring end to a Vietnam War anti-war rally being held on the campus. While at Kent State University, guardsmen opened fire on the protesters, killing four students. These anti-war protests were occurring all over the nation, resulting in colleges and universities deciding to employ their own police departments, rather than having outsiders maintain order on campus.

Campus police departments have evolved to conduct themselves more professionally and in the same manner as municipal law enforcement officers as previously discussed. A comparison of campus police departments conducted in 1986 and those of 2006 found a 62% increase in the use of term *police department* and a 65% decrease in the use of term *security* (Peak et al., 2008). The study further noted that use of the title *Department of Public Safety* remained high for departments comprised of non-sworn, security officers. The use of *Department of Public Safety* is deceptive when used by agencies comprised of non-sworn, security officers and likely mistaken with the purpose of departments comprised of sworn, credentialed officers using the title *police department*.

Campus Community Perceptions of Campus Police Officers

The campus community's perceptions of the legitimacy and effectiveness of campus police strain the needed relationship to achieve campus safety. This perspective for students begins at high school or sooner. A study of high school students found that 69% of respondents believed that School Resource Officers, security cameras, and metal detectors were unnecessary in their schools (Bracy, 2011). Further, the study reported that high school students did not believe the presence of School Resource Officers provided any additional safety, nor did it deter student crime. An additional research documented that high school teachers recognized an overall positive change in campus climate when School Resource Officers operated in an advising or mentoring role (Denham, 2013). An advising or mentoring role deviants from the traditional role of police officers to maintain order and ensure safety.

College and university students lack trust in the legitimacy and abilities of campus police to maintain order and ensure safety. Public-university students question whether the work completed by campus police officers was real police work and further believed that the antagonistic approach campus police officers used with students deterred students from seeking help from an officer (Jacobsen, 2015). These same students perceived that campus police officers worked on school campuses because they were not fit to be the real police (Jacobsen, 2015). These perspectives are not only associated with on-campus interactions between the campus community and campus police, but as well realized by law enforcement officers within the communities they serve.

Public Opinions of Law Enforcement Officers

A 2003 study published by the Vera Institute for Justice found that citizens' personal interactions with an officer affected their perceptions of police officers (Miller et al, 2003). The

study found that citizens with informal or indirect contact with police officers had neutral views of law enforcement officers, while citizens with a history of formal or direct interactions with police had fewer positive views and less confidence in police officers (Miller et al., 2003). Further, the research revealed similar neutral or negative opinions of police officers from citizens who had no contact with officers themselves, rather gained the opinion by the encounters their family and friends had with law enforcement officers. As college students are also citizens of the society, it can be inferred that their earlier interactions with police community may affect the way they interact with campus police officers on college campuses.

A public perception of campus police exists for students, parents, and the campus community. Positive and negative perceptions of police officers are a culture within families and communities and poses a challenge for campus police officers. These perceptions, as well as how institutions address them, influence a student's connection to the institution.

College Campus Safety

There are many aspects students and parents consider before selecting a post-secondary educational institution. In 2017, 70% of entering college freshman chose colleges based on affordability, availability of a desired program, reputation/academic quality, career outcomes/job opportunities for graduates, value of education for cost of attending or feeling of fit (Reid, 2017). Campus safety was not among the major considerations for students when choosing a college or university. In 2017, College Stats provided that 29% of college students had no safety concerns in regards to college campuses. College Stats concluded that the lack of safety concerns on college campuses was due to the efforts undertaken by colleges and universities to provided safe and secure environments for their students. Current data shows a shift from campus safety concerns from both students and parents realized in past decades.

In 1997, Art & Science Group found that campus safety was considered one of the top concerns of prospective students and their parents when selecting a post-secondary educational institution. The study provided that 57% of students and 64% of parents responded that the safety of a campus was an important factor when choosing a four-year university. In the late 1990s, students and parents differed on their concerns related to campus safety risks. Art & Science Group found that parents were most concerned about excessive drinking of alcohol by their children and students were most concerned about the presence of weapons on campus. When this study was performed, 24 years ago, campus crime and safety statistics were not readily available or deemed credible by parents (Art & Science Group, 1997). Incidents of campus violence and the corresponding concern from students and parents had created a need for colleges and universities to address public safety through reporting of crimes and crime prevention initiatives. In 1990, through federal law, parents and students were provided information regarding campus safety due to the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act.

Jeanne Clery Act

The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, widely known as the Clery Act, is a federal law passed in 1990 after the rape and murder of Jeanne Clery in her college dormitory (McCallion, 2014). Clery's parents were unaware of the dangers their daughter would face on campus and lobbied the federal government to ensure colleges and universities were accountable and transparent with regard to their responsibilities of a student's safety and security on campus. The act requires that colleges and universities disclose all reported campus crime and statistics; non-compliance results in a potential loss of funding through the U.S. Department of Education (Federal Student Aid, 2020). Through an annual

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security report, colleges and universities must provide public access to specific crimes occurring on their properties and or properties associated with campus life. These specific crimes are referred to as *clery crimes.* According to the Clery Center (2018), clery crimes include murder/non-negligent manslaughter, manslaughter by negligence, sex offenses, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson, hate crimes, liquor law violations, drug law violations, weapons law violations, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. Clery Act data from 2018 provides burglary as the most reported crime in the United States with 9,770 individual instances. Rape is provided as the second most reported crime in 2018 with 6,749 individual instances.

Reports of rape and other acts of violence against women (VAW) on college campuses is the focus of much of Clery Act research. Research and analysis of 2014-2016 Clery data found that instances of violence against women significantly increased each year (Wiersma-Mosely et al., 2020). This study further revealed that institutions considered *party schools* reported a low number of reported instances of violence against women. This finding contradicted previous research conducted by the same authors. The study defined *party schools* as public institutions with high student enrollment, high alcohol law violations, high Greek-life membership, and high athletics prominence. In 2017, Wiersma-Mosely et al., found that the demographics that make up *party schools* are also variables associated with higher numbers of rapes reported on campuses. In the 2020 research, Wiersma-Mosely et al. concluded that this discrepancy might be due to students not reporting these incidents.

Campus Crime and Violence

Safety concerns have shifted from fears of alcohol and drug use to campus physical and sexual assaults (Paterson, 2020). Although nearly 70% of college-aged students reported

marijuana use and 35% admitted to recreational use of prescription stimulants, drug use alone is no longer the major concern (Arria et al., 2017). Prospective students and their parents are increasingly concerned with violence that occurs on college campuses (Paterson, 2020). A 2018 study performed by the National Association of College Admissions Counseling found that 47% of high school counselors reported increases in their responsibilities for communicating with parents regarding school violence. Disruptive behaviors and potential violence associated with drug use were identified as an area of major concern in educational institutions (Allen & Lengfellner, 2016). However, substance abuse has not been a sole cause for campus crime and violence. The same study further revealed that diagnosable mental illness disorders were found to be present in 37% of college students who were also more likely to exhibit violent behaviors on campus.

Campus crime and violence occur on college campuses in many ways. The Federal Bureau of Investigations categorizes the majority of campus crime and violence into three categories: crimes against persons, crimes against property, and crimes against society. Collectively, the crimes within these three categories include drug/narcotic violations, simple assault, aggravated assault, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, manslaughter, and murder. Uniform Crime Reporting data from 2004 found that between the years of 2000 and 2004, drug violations and simple assaults accounted for the majority of college campus arrests of students and non-students (FBI, 2020). Additionally, over the same five-year period, 106,281 incidents of property damage occurred on college campuses (FBI, 2020). In 2018, Clery Act data collected by the U.S. Department of Education provided the top three reported campus crimes were burglary, rape, and fondling with 9,770, 6,749, and 5,634 incidents, respectively. Violent crimes occurring on college campuses are often unreported. Clery Act data from 2016 provided that

89% of colleges and universities reported no incidents of rape on their campuses. The American Association of University Women (AAUW, n.d.) attributes the lack of reporting, specifically crimes of sexual violence against women, to the difficulty women face in coming forward. The AAUW further provides that fear of reporting to school officials and law enforcement, procedural gaps in institutional responses and institutional reluctance to participate in reporting programs as contributing factor to low report rates of sexual violence against women on college campuses. Unreported crimes are not only seen on college campuses. The U. S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics offers that only 45% of all violent victimizations and 36% of all property victimizations are reported to the police (Morgan & Truman, 2018). Evidence exists that students who distrust police are less likely to report crimes (Baker & Moore, 2016). Trust or a lack of trust in law enforcement is formed prior to students entering college. As discussed previously, distrust in law enforcement is a nation-wide issue. Campus police departments depend on positive relationships with the campus community to maintain order and prevent crime.

Importance of Positive Connections on Campus

Positive campus connections on campus and with campus police require a built trust among campus community members. In addition to maintaining campus safety and security for student wellness and recruitment efforts, institutions recognize the positive effect strong campus relationships have on student success and retention. Students who are fearful of serious violent crimes or of discipline on college campuses are less likely to participate in productive educational activities (Schuck, 2017). Through this same study, Schuck found that serious violent campus crimes and arrests involving students were related to lower graduation rates. Institutions can support retention of students by providing an environment of expectations,

support, feedback, involvement, and learning (Tinto, 1999). Initial retention efforts are in the form of campus orientations with introduction to policies, procedures, and support services. Student support services, both academic and social, have shown to increase the retention of college students (Tinto, 1999). A social and personal connection to the institution is a factor of retention and student success. Students who are socially integrated are more likely than not to have better academic and social experiences in a college setting (Jorgenson et al., 2018). Institutions recognize that students are more likely to re-enroll and graduate from the institution when they possess a social connection to or have a high level of satisfaction with the institution (Perez, 2020). Connection to an institution can be established through any campus employee (Jorgenson et al., 2018). While the most apparent connection is that of faculty to student, a student's connection to employees outside of instruction has the potential to be just as meaningful and significant to student success.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the current relevant literature. First, the current national climate regarding law enforcement agencies was pronounced. Second, the institution of campus law enforcement services was described beginning with the events that led to the creation of the first campus police department and the evolution within the establishment since. Further, the campus community's perceptions of campus police departments were explored. Next, a review of college campus safety was defined to include statistics of crime and violence that occurs on college campuses thus establishing a necessity for campus police departments. Additionally, this chapter detailed the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act and its impact on the reporting of campus crime statistics. Finally,

the importance of positive connections on campus was explored. The next chapter describes the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to investigate the phenomenon associated with students' perceptions of campus police officers at a two-year, community college. This approach allowed for an interactive environment for participants to openly share their thoughts of campus law enforcement. This format provided participants the opportunity to detail their personal experiences and perspectives. The primary components of this chapter include the research design, study participants, study instrument, data collection, and data analysis.

The purpose of the study was to identify the participant's opinions of the services provided by campus law enforcement. Through the study, the researcher sought to determine the participant's expectations of safety and interactions with campus police officers. To guide this study, the researcher developed the following relevant questions:

1. What are the students' perspectives of the roles of campus police officers on MGCCC commuter and resident campuses?

2. How confident are MGCCC students in the abilities of campus police officers to provide a safe learning environment?

3. How safe do MGCCC students feel in the presence of campus police officers?

4. What are MGCCC students' beliefs and perceptions toward having a Campus Police department on campus?

Research Design

This study attempted to discover an understanding of the perceptions two-year college students had of campus police officers. A phenomenological qualitative research design was applied. This approach was appropriate as the goal of the study was to identify the perceptions

and opinions of the selected participants through their lived experiences (Grossoehme, 2014). As a research strategy, phenomenology discovers the spirit of human experiences in relation to a phenomenon as told by the study participants (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenological research methods include interviews and focus groups. This study utilized these methods to facilitate the research questions. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked open-ended interview questions to allow participants to freely present their opinions in their own ways.

Setting, Population, and Participants

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) serves 8,000 credit students annually throughout Harrison, Jackson, Stone, and George counties in south Mississippi. MGCCC operates and staffs 10 locations within the four-county district. MGCCC employs approximately 25 full-time campus police officers and 45 part-time campus police officers on seven of its 10 locations. MGCCC was chosen as the study setting due to its presence in urban and rural areas of south Mississippi, allowing for participants from diverse environments. The participant population for the study included full-time, undergraduate students within the School of Education and Human Services at MGCCC. The School of Education and Human Services includes students with areas of interest in criminal justice, sociology, psychology, and education. This population was selected due to the overall size of the school, as well as the connection between the learning concepts of the population and the concepts of this study. From this population of approximately 835 students, a maximum number of 30 students were intended to participate in the study. The population consisted of students 18 years of age or older. Participants were considered full-time enrolled students at MGCCC during the summer 2021, fall 2021, or spring 2021 semesters.

Instrument and Data Collection

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. The approach chosen allowed for participants to openly share their experiences within a comfortable environment. The interview guide was developed from the research questions stated within this chapter and consisted of 14 open-ended questions. The first section of questions pertained to the participant's connection to the college, specifically their length of enrollment, status as a resident or commuter student, and any college associated, extracurricular activities. The second section of questions related to the participant's opinions of the roles of campus police and the participant's perceived level of safety while on campus. The final questions explored recommendations from the participants on how to best build stronger relationships between students and campus law enforcement.

In December 2021, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study (Appendix A). Upon the receipt of IRB approval, the researcher requested that the Institutional Research (IR) department of MGCCC send the study advertisement out to the research population via email to invite them to participate in the study. The researcher requested that the office of Institutional Research at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College email the study advertisement to full-time enrolled undergraduate students within the School of Human Sciences and Education. The study advertisement directed students to contact the researcher if interested in participating in the study. Students who contacted the researcher with their intent to participate were provided an informed consent form for their review and signature. The participant interviews were conducted via WebEx and Zoom. The interviews were held during the spring 2022 semester, from January 2022 to May 2022. The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded. Only participants who consented to being audio recorded participated in the study. Transcriptions were created from the interview and focus group audio recordings. To protect the

participants' identity, pseudonyms for all participants and all other persons mentioned in the interviews and focus groups were used in the transcripts of the audio recordings.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and reviewed for common themes and perspectives in participants' shared experiences. Thematic analysis of the data was utilized to "allow categories to emerge from the data" (Saldana, 2012, p. 177). Specifically, the transcriptions were coded to identify any themes discovered during the interviews. Coding of the interviews allowed the researcher to reflect on the questions and responses as themes began to emerge from the data. Coding was used to assist the researcher in understanding the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Summary

This chapter explored the methodology of the study beginning with the design of the study. Second, the study setting, population and participants were explained. Next, the instrument and data collection were detailed. Lastly, the method of data analysis was stated. The next chapter, Chapter Four, explains the findings of the data collected.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from interviews with 10 students from

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) who volunteered to share their

perceptions and experiences of campus police officers on their college campuses. The sample

primarily consisted of female students, with only two male participants. The participants'

academic profiles ranged from first-time, first-year students to non-traditional students who had

attended two or more post-secondary educational intuitions prior to MGCCC. Additional

participant demographics are presented below (Table 1).

Table 1

Research Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race
Participant 1	Female	Caucasian
Participant 2	Female	African American
Participant 3	Female	Caucasian
Participant 4	Male	Caucasian
Participant 5	Male	Asian American
Participant 6	Female	Caucasian
Participant 7	Female	Caucasian
Participant 8	Female	African American
Participant 9	Female	Caucasian
Participant 10	Female	African American

The results of this study revealed the following three themes in connection to student

perceptions of campus police officers on two-year college campuses: (1) student awareness of

their campus safety, (2) understanding the unique roles of campus police officers, and (3)

building student relationships with the campus police department. As this study portrayed the perceptions of 10 participants, not all students were represented in the quotes. The students whose narratives were not portrayed in the quotes echoed the viewpoints and positions of their fellow students.

Student Awareness of Their Campus Safety

The first theme identified was the varied levels of awareness students had in regards to their own campus safety. Most participants struggled to identify what safety on campus meant to them. Participants perceived a certain, general level of safety while on campus but did not provide any ownership in that safety. Participant 5 offered an expectation of being able to "live and study carefree" with the ability to "go on with being a student without worrying about problems". Participant 3, a female, provided that being able to "use the restroom without fear of being jumped" was all she could say regarding her expectation of safety while on campus.

When asked to identify their expectations of safety on campus, many participants provided what duties they expected campus police officers to perform while on campus. Participant 10, a female student in her second semester explained:

> Since I drive to campus, I want to be sure my car is not vandalized or anything. Like making sure no one scratches it or anything. Making sure no one breaks into it on campus. Making sure classrooms are safe and we have no bomb threats. Making sure we are safe where we can just worry about learning and not worry about anything else.

While most participants were unable to clearly state their expectations of safety while on campus, one sophomore student said a "bothersome situation on campus" shaped her safety expectations. After this incident, Participant 1 explained what she expects from the college in terms of her safety:

Definitely not allowing vagrants onto campus would be one of them. Just making sure we

don't have people walking around campus that aren't students. I would really like to see

ID checks honestly, at the gates of the campus. I would like to know that the campus is

not assessible for whoever to come in and out. I believe an officer should be at every

building to greet students and make sure everyone is okay.

Participant 8, another sophomore student echoed the expectation of seeing a campus police

officer in all campus buildings and grounds. She detailed the expectation that an officer "walks

me to my car after my night class".

Understanding the Unique Roles of Campus Police Officers

While discussing the individual student's expectation of safety while on campus, many

described their expectations of the duties campus police officers should be performing while on

campus. These student responses provided a wide range of perceptions regarding the roles of a

campus police officer. Collectively, students believed the primary responsibility of campus

police officers is to provide safety and protection to the campus. Most participant responses

included the safety and protection of campus and student property. Maintaining order on campus,

providing a disruption free environment, and providing protection to the campus community

were duties provided by many of the respondents. One participant noted that service to the

students was the primary role of campus police officers. Participant 9, a first-time, first-year non-

traditional student offered:

The primary role of an officer on campus is to serve the students. The officer should be

proactive and aware of all concerns of students and potential dangers to students. I expect

campus police officers to preserve my sense of safety while I am on campus. I also

expect them to see my issues as valid and to not treat me like I am wasting their time with

things that bother me.

Many interviewees perceived the primary duties and tasks of campus police officers to be

different then those of their municipal law enforcement counterparts. Participant 8 stated that the

duties and responsibilities of campus police officer are "less" than that of city patrolman, as

campus police "only have to worry about the campus and not an entire city". Most respondents

believed that campus police officers were "friendlier" and "less extreme". Two participants

stated that campus police officers were not the same as a city or county officer in that they did

not have the authority to arrest individuals or carry a firearm. When asked their opinions of

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College employing state commissioned law enforcement

officers who had the authority to arrest and carry a firearm, students perceived this to be

necessary in today's environment. However, Participant 8 felt that this level of force was

unnecessary, stating "we have a safe campus, I've never heard of a large incident in our area and

armed officers on campus probably make students uncomfortable". Participant 1 believed this

caliber of officer is appreciated by the student body, but only if each individual campus police

officer "recognizes the power this gives them over the students" and "students expect them to

take this seriously and use this power to help students".

Prior to their interviews, many interviewees were unaware that MGCCC campus police

officers receive the same training and hold the same credentials as their municipal law

enforcement counterparts. Discovering this, Participant 9 appreciated the interactions she had

with campus police officers more than she had before, as the officers "didn't act like cops".

Attending a college that made a "responsible decision to provide appropriately trained officers

on campus" was important to Participant 4.

Building Student Relationships with the Campus Police Department

Many participants mentioned interactions with the campus police department for routine items such as obtaining their student identification, vehicle parking decals, or fingerprinting requirements. Four interviewees detailed incidents that occurred on campus that required the assistance of a campus police officer. The student perception of these interactions ranged from "I felt like I was bothering them and wasting their time" to "they really took the time to help and make sure I understood the process". During an interaction with a campus police officer, Participant 1 felt like a burden, explaining:

> My issue on campus was not handled the way I expected. I felt like I was not being heard and that my concerns were not valid. The female officer took me seriously, but the male officer took the side of the individual who wasn't even supposed to be on campus. I expected the officer to make me, the student feel safe and not the other person who had not business being on campus.

After this interaction with campus police, participant felt like when she encounters an officer on campus that they look at her like a "crazy person".

Most interviewees stated that they feel comfortable in the presence of campus police officers; however, one participant who has experienced police brutality off campus shared being nervous around police officers on and off campus. Participant 6 detailed being "overly and intentionally polite" when near officers on campus, but attempts to "avoid being around them unless I have to". Although comfortable around officers on campus, most students perceived there to be low to no relationship between the campus police department and the student body. One of the ten students interviewed believed the relationship between officers and students was strong. Many students detailed no basis for judgement, as their experiences with campus police

were minimal. Two participants found no issue with the lack of connection to campus police officers. Participant 7 felt that a relationship between officers and students was "not a 100% necessary", offering that "as long as they are diligent in keeping us safe, I don't need to have conversations with them". Further, Participant 8, who believed there to be a relationship, preferred that the campus police department "have their own dedicated space for students to visit them if the student choose to".

When discussing the lack of relationship, a majority of the participants felt that the college should seek ways to strengthen the relationships between all departments and the student body. When addressing the campus police department directly, interviewees believed this starts by seeing officers more often on campus patrolling:

> I see them rarely and I don't know their names. I truly could not tell you who they are if I had to. I never see them in the hallways. The college should really have some meetings or events that would bring us all together that are focused on campus police. I mean an event for campus police and not an event that they show up to. It wouldn't be a bad idea for campus police to have a table or booth at all events on campus.

Participant 9 echoed the need for more positive interaction as a way of educating the student body on resources that the campus police department have that students are not aware of:

> There is no literature around campus that tells students how they can get help if they need it or anything that tells the students how the campus can help with things that aren't related to academic needs. A list of resources or frequently asked questions would educate students on what help is available to them.

Many other respondents perceived events such as "Coffee with a Cop" or other meet and greet opportunities as a good first step in building a relationship between officers and students.

Summary

This chapter contains the results of the data analysis and connects the analysis back to the research questions. Overall, each of the 10 participants found value in having campus police departments on MGCCC campuses. However, they also expressed a lack of understanding of campus safety and the roles and responsibilities of campus police officers. While the interviewees believed in the abilities of campus police officers to provide campus safety, many felt that there is a disconnect between the officers and the student body. The disconnection has led to participants not understanding the types of assistance and resources available to students through campus police departments.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine students' perceptions of campus police officers on commuter and resident campuses of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. This chapter discusses the major findings as related to the literature on law enforcement officers on college campuses and what implications may be valuable for use by students, campus police officers, and higher education administrators. Also included is a discussion on student's awareness of their own safety and the unique role of a campus police department. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for stakeholders and recommendations for future practice, as well as limitations of this study and recommendations for future research. The findings and recommendations outlined below are based on the experiences of the ten participants, the research questions, and the themes emerging from the data analysis. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) student awareness of their campus safety, (b) understanding the unique roles of campus police officers, and (c) building student relationships with the campus police department.

This study's conclusion is that students' lack awareness of their own safety on campus is aligned with previous literature that indicated that roughly 30% of college students had no concerns for their safety while on campus (College Stats, 2017). While students expect to be safe on campus, many of the participants were unable to provide specific incidents that would lead them to feel unsafe. Female participants emphasized greater concern regarding physical harm, while male participants spoke specifically to concern for their physical property while on campus. These findings are consistent with crime data as it relates to college campuses. Of the major crimes to occur on a college campus, violence against women increases each year

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(Weirsma-Mosely et al., 2020). Conversely, property crimes, specifically burglary are among the top three crimes committed on college campuses (FBI, 2020).

In this study, most of the participants indicated a high level of confidence in the abilities of campus police officers to provide a physically safe learning environment. This confidence allows students to place their worry in other areas outside of their own safety. Although some participants experienced on-campus incidents that frightened or concerned them, they did not indicate a decrease in confidence in the campus police department.

Each of the participants valued the institution's decision to employ certified law enforcement officers. However, most of the participants did not view campus police officers as *normal* cops and believed a security guard would be adequate. In line with prior research, the participants in this study also viewed the duties and responsibilities of campus police officers as *not real police work* (Jacobson, 2015). While all participants mentioned unlocking doors as a primary function of a campus police officer, none of the participants recognized this duty as the one that ensures safety.

The negative, national climate related to law enforcement was not present in this study. Many of the participants expressed respect for campus police officers, which may be explained by their beliefs that campus police officers are not like other cops. Previous research indicates that more formal, direct interactions a citizen has with a law enforcement officer, the less confident that citizen is in the abilities of the officer (Miller et al., 2003). This study's conclusion both aligns to and contradicts this prior literature. Many participants within this study experienced positive interactions with officers that provided a newfound respect and appreciation for the campus police department. However, some participants experienced interactions in which

the officer was less than helpful and unsure of the policies and procedures to assist the student appropriately with their issue.

The participants in this study did not feel a connection to the campus police department or its officers. While confident in the abilities of campus police officers, participants did not address their level of trust in individual officers or the department as a whole. Distrust or the absence of trust may be a reason that students may not report crimes or incidents to campus police officers (Baker & Moore, 2016).

Implications and Recommendations for Future Practice

This study concluded that students are indifferent to campus police officers. The students interviewed did not share the national negative views of law enforcement officers, but unless the student had a positive interaction with an officer on campus, they had a neutral view of the officer. This outlook may be explained by the lack of understanding of the role of campus police officers. Prior to examining the student's attitudes towards campus police officers, student orientation to campus safety is necessary. Additionally, this study concluded that students have a vague expectation of their own safety when on campus. Measures should be taken to ensure the student body is educated on the resources available to them as they relate to safety and security. These efforts should include meet and greet events for students and campus police officers to collaborate on a wide range of topics. Furthermore, infographics with frequently asked questions and important information regarding campus safety should be posted in highly visible, high traffic campus areas.

The responsibility to implement change to this indifferent view is on higher education administrators and the campus police departments. Campus police officers and their leadership must develop an active protocol to engage with the student body on a positive, open level. This

protocol should include targeted discussions about what campus safety means and the roles that students and officers play in achieving a safe learning environment.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on students' perceptions of law enforcement officers on two-year college campuses. Ten participants from one institution were interviewed to discover how students perceived the abilities of campus police officers and to determine the strength of the relationships between officers and the student body. The number of participants provided an adequate amount of data to meet the purpose of this study, but conducting the research at one institution limited the study to one setting only.

Several areas for future research on targeted demographics could enhance the findings of this study. Conducting this study with additional two-year colleges in the state of Mississippi and in other regions of the United States could potentially offer different opinions and beliefs than the students from this study. Students in other regions are likely to have different experiences related to their upbringing and culture. Additionally, this study only included students from a two-year college. Expanding this study to four-year universities may provide additional experiences from students with three or more years as a student on a college campus. The additional time as a college student has the potential to add an increased level of maturity or interactions that can aid to participant responses.

From a gender perspective, this study lacked diversity of participants. This study included the perspectives and experiences of eight females and two males. Further research that targets the opinions of male students specifically may provide a more in-depth examination of how male students perceive and engage with campus law enforcement officers.

This study did not include the perspectives and experiences of campus police officers, campus police chiefs, or college leadership. Conducting a study that obtains the perspectives of campus police officers and administrators may provide a holistic view of the dynamic between a campus police department, the college, and the student body. Higher education administrators could use the themes discovered within this study to enhance the relationships the student body has to all college departments.

Conclusion

The idea that all students will make a connection with all members of a college campus community is a fallacy. However, ensuring that students are aware of and recognize the resources available to them is possible. Through this study, the researcher hoped to gain information to establish best practices to enhance the relationship between campus police officers and the students they serve. Building these relationships will connect students with other individuals who can assist them in the college success. By identifying how students feel about the presence and the abilities of law enforcement officers on college campus, the researcher intended to provide higher education administrators with the information necessary to enact positive change and opinions of law enforcement to young adults.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

**Office *of*
Research Integrity**

THE UNIVERSITY OF
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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 21-090
PROJECT TITLE: Perceptions of Campus Police Officers on Two-Year College Campuses
SCHOOL/PROGRAM   Educational Research & Adminstration
RESEARCHERS: PI: Blythe King
    Investigators: King, Blythe~Krsmanovic, Masha~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 03-Dec-2021 to 02-Dec-2022

Donald Sacco

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson")