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# An Exploratory Analysis of Media Reporting of Police Involved Shootings in Florida

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An Exploratory Analysis of Media Reporting of Police Involved Shootings in Florida

by

John L. Brown

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## **Dedication**

It is with great joy that I dedicate this thesis to my parents, my dogs Kemba and Nyah, and the  
memory of David Lynn Stillings

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for a number of people who contributed to the completion of this thesis. Certainly foremost among them is my committee chair, Dr. John Cochran, who has given selfless amounts of time and energy to aid me during the course of my research. I have learned a great deal from Dr. Cochran, and I appreciate the respect, wisdom, and mentoring he has shown me. I am also grateful to Dr. Michael Lynch and Dr. H. Roy Kaplan who agreed to be members of my thesis committee. Their comments and questions certainly assisted in focusing the direction of my research and the final thesis. Although a number of faculty members have encouraged me in conducting this research, I am particularly indebted to Dr. Stephen Turner for providing me with the opportunity to be a part of the Social and Political Thought program. Finally, I extend my appreciation, greater than she will ever know, to Eileen Kahl for her support and encouragement throughout my graduate studies career. This thesis would have never been possible had it not been for the love and faith of my friends and family; for this, I will be forever in their debt.

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this study is on media reporting of police involved shootings in Florida. Given that knowledge of killings committed by law enforcement are frequently restricted to what people get from news sources, it is important to investigate the way these messages are being communicated. An exploratory analysis of 199 articles and transcripts covering 86 cases relevant to deadly use of force by police officers as reported from 2013 to 2015 provided the primary data source. The analysis engaged a critical examination of media content and goodness of fit models to identify commonalities used by the media when reporting police involved shootings. The goal is to determine the potential impact of race, age and gender of a victim with regard to the media's portrayal of events that result in lethal use of force by police. It is expected that exposure of the discoveries in this study will influence future law enforcement reporting systems for a more transparent relationship between police, news and the community. The demographics characteristics race, sex and age that were assessed in this study were not significantly associated with the length of media coverage on police involved shootings. However, further analysis using different modeling approaches are required for a better understanding as to whether a relationship exists.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

It was just after 7pm on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 in Sanford, Florida when neighborhood watchmen George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American male. Martin was unarmed. Zimmerman, a 28-year-old white Latino male, fired one bullet to the chest from his 9mm handgun (Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert, & Martin, 2014). The most memorable events during the NBA All-Star game halftime show that evening was the one minute and twelve second encounter that left Trayvon Martin lifeless in the middle of the Retreat at Twin Lakes subdivision. As the story began to get more traction, communities reacted in protest across the country. Florida's governor called for a state law enforcement investigation. The US Department of Justice and the FBI launched their own independent investigations. There was a clear divide on the interpretation of the Stand your Ground law and news cycle after news cycle posed the question of whether or not the killing was a righteous shoot.

Within two weeks, the story had become shark bait as media sources of every size and shape flooded public perception. Both Martin and Zimmerman became christened with specific narratives based on the racial and sociopolitical beliefs of communities that sided with them. Partisan media, the engine behind news reporting, constantly exploited the great debate happening across the country; whether Zimmerman was justified in enforcing the law as his right, or was he overstepping his gun rights, by taking things into his own hands and killing an innocent juvenile (Benash, 2014).

George Zimmerman was often portrayed by the media as a “wannabe cop”. His judgment and decision to act with deadly use of force is a decision that has been ever growing and tolerated amongst law enforcement agencies. Deaths at the hands of individuals with legal authority to use deadly force, such as law enforcement, were recognized by the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report as a substantial component in the second leading cause of death in the United States (Parks, Johnson McDaniel, & Gladden, 2014).

There is a grey area in the discussion of police use of deadly force, especially in recent years. Reoccurring conversations across the country question if race triggers certain attitudes and stereotypes among law enforcement that would influence police decisions to use force. Is use of force, against blacks in particular, racially charged? The implicit-bias perspective says yes. However, the argument against this theory, the counter-bias perspective, claims that in reality, officers are hesitant to use force against minorities because of the repercussions that may follow (Fridell & Lim, 2015). A 2015 study of 1,846 police encounters ending in some type of force concluded that there are consistencies with the implicit-bias perspective, defining race as a factor in an officer’s bias when the victim was black (Fridell & Lim, 2015). The media’s heavy involvement in these cases is uncommon. Law enforcement is known to be an official source for the media when it comes to killings involving police officers. Reporters who have strong ties to law enforcement normally deliver their stories in a way that would justify the decisions made by a police officer, thus creating a bias in their reporting. Deaths involving police have “framed” storylines and often receive different media coverage than other causes of death (Campbell, 2012). In rare instances, there are high profile (event-driven) cases that receive more in depth media reporting (Lawrence, 2000; Lee and McGovern, 2014). Lawrence (2000) refers to the “institutionally-driven” stories about killings involving police officers as being “officially

dominated” and the more common situation. In essence, the events are framed by the law enforcement agency involved with public relations tactics, such as use of authorized documents like press releases. These documents then shape the conversation around what occurred and who is at fault.

It is important to take a look at deadly use of force in Florida involving police officers due to the lack of official record in the state. In many cases reports by the media are the only record available. Florida in particular, has experienced a significant spike in police involved-shootings that have resulted in death, specifically north of 300% between 1999 and 2013 (Torres, 2014). University of South Florida professor, Lorrie Fridell explains the discrepancies that analysts face when trying to link such an exponential rise in officer-involved shootings in Florida to uptrends across the country, and if the state stands alone in this development. “My sense from national reports in recent years is that this might be the case,” Fridell said. “But the caveat associated with the data is that we can’t know for sure whether the statistics can reflect an actual phenomenon or variations in reporting by agency” (Torres, 2014).

The Uniform Crime Reports Program is run by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and is responsible for collecting all crime data from every law enforcement agency in the state. However, it is important to note that all reporting is completely voluntary and it continues to be the standard in measuring crime in Florida (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015). Voluntary reports by police departments and other agencies alike tend to hold onto their reports until these homicides are considered justifiable, many of which can take up to eight years (Torres, 2014). According to Suman Kakar, a professor at Florida International University, this leaves room for agencies to “under-report” even though the shootings were labeled justified (Torres, 2014. “I’m not surprised by the numbers to some extent, but I’m suspicious of it,” Kakar

said, “They [law enforcement] report what they want to report. But this is the tip of the iceberg” (Torres, 2014).

The intent of this study is to determine through quantitative analysis whether or not media reporting of police involved killings in Florida continued the event-driven trend following the death of Trayvon Martin. Quantitative measurements in this research will determine whether or not there was an increase or decrease in the frequency, as well as the volume of reporting related to law enforcement deadly use-of-force in the aftermath of this event controlling for the media coverage exclusively on the killing of Trayvon Martin. This will be accomplished through a longitudinal analysis, observing developmental trends involving numerical variables in each article such as word count and photo content. The analyses will look to see if there are any major differences in media reporting between victims based on age, sex and race. This will be attained through regression analysis of content pulled from newspaper articles from January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013 through June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

This research will expand on the current literature on media reporting of police involved killings by focusing on incidents that took place in Florida between 2012 and 2015. This study will elaborate on a view that has been scarcely covered in the state of Florida. By focusing on this timespan, trends over time will unveil whether the saturation of media coverage continued post the high profile Martin story or if that case was an outlier.

This chapter introduced the topic and the purpose of this research with a brief discussion of the theoretical foundation, relevant literature and applicable methodology. Chapter 2 will present a more exhaustive review of the literature necessary to situate this work into the larger body of knowledge. Chapter 3 will describe in detail the proposed methodology including data

collection, sampling, data coding, and analysis. In Chapter 4, the results of this analysis will be presented and discussed. Finally, Chapter 5 will interpret these results and discuss the implications and limitations of this research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter covers the growing influence of the media on society as a culture and how society has developed as a result. Then, the literature describing the application of media to issues of crime and justice will be discussed as well as what research indicates about the role of law enforcement agencies play in the construction of narratives when it comes to killings involving police officers.

### **A Brief History of the Media-Society Relationship**

The history of media and society in the United States evolved simultaneously. As such, both will be examined in the context of McQuail's (1979) three phases of history outlining the effects of mass communication on public opinion, politics, and other social constructs. The renowned American linguist Noam Chomsky (2004) once said, "You don't have any other society where the educated classes are so effectively indoctrinated and controlled by a subtle propaganda system – a private system including media, intellectual opinion forming magazines and the participation of the most highly educated sections of the population" (p. 474-475). Chomsky, along with Edward Herman, introduced their propaganda model in 1988, drawing an image of the media that catered to the wealthy, elite and powerful interests by filtering news through these groups before disseminating to the public (Pedro, 2011). McQuail (1979) dissects approximately fifty years of the effects media has had on society, dividing them into three phases, and providing a persuasive interpretation of the media-society interactions. Both media and society will be observed and the commonalities between each will be discussed.

**Phase one.** The first phase, dating back to before the 1930s, witnessed the emergence of media in both the United States and Europe (McQuail, 1979). There is a general consensus in research that the media was an institution of great influence. The manipulation of the public during the propaganda era of WWI is a stigma that remains in news reporting (McQuail, 1979). Early studies looking at the power of the media and its capabilities consisted of a long fought contest between the liberal-pluralists and Marxists (Gurevitch, Bennet, Curran, & Woollacott (Eds.), 1982). The approach to media theory acknowledged for its liberal-pluralist views developed in the United States. Known historically as a more practical approach, the pluralist perspective saw the media as being controlled by an autonomy of elite organizations, like states and political parties, that allowed them room to use their own judgment as experts in the field (Gurevitch et al., 1982).

**Phase two.** The second phase, taking place in the 1940s and continuing well into the 1960s, was home to the rise of research of mass communications in the United States (McQuail, 1979). Well into the 1950s, it was established that the media's audience was interchangeable and continued to influence the media through different movements that shifted their opinions and values based on need. Empirical studies, although few, made a lasting impact on the views that presented media sources; up until that point in time, radio, film and the press had not been primary factors in swaying public opinion on social issues (Curran, Gurevitch, & Woollacott, 2005). What was once a sure theory of the media's powerful effect on society was now on the fence for key researchers like Klapper, Katz and Lazarsfeld (Curran et al., 2005). Klapper, who tracked the effects of mass media during the 1940s up to the 1960s, concluded that it's influence was not as concrete; what was once believed to be heavily controlled by the "autonomous managerial elite" then brought into question whether wealth and power were enough to sway

public views (Schramm, 1961). According to Katz and Lazarsfeld, “Some individuals of high social status apparently wield little independent influence... and some of low status have considerable personal influence” (Curran et al., 2005, p. 7).

**Phase three.** The last phase involved a shift in thinking when it came to mass communications and the type of influence it imposed as the development of television expanded the media universe. McQuail (1979) provides a series of explanations as to why a change in research methods was necessary. Previous methods weren't completely dismissed, but there was a dire need for a more accurate and sufficient method in which to measure the social power of the media. Identified as a more theoretical approach, the Marxist view highlights capitalist society as the more superior society. Though perceived as a level playing field that caters to each social class, the media adopts ideologies of the dominant culture and presents their agenda as a platform (McQuail, 1979). Along with the 60's and 70's came changes in society's make up and political landscape with the emergence of television, challenging the accuracy of previous research. Many differences in the interpretations of the media's purpose, as well as effectiveness, was much due to the contradictions in ideologies among researchers like Jay Blumler. Blumler introduced a “new orthodoxy” that questioned early studies with rigorous empirical research that revealed the inadequacy of unsubstantiated theorizing about the mass media (Curran et al., 2005). Despite the constant battle between classical empirical studies and the new orthodoxy, the media's primary role remains, which is to conform to the views of its audience.

## **Crime News, Justice and the Media**

While the historical instances of media relationships seem to reveal that views of the media consistently adapt to the opinions of its audience, research shows that this is more often on a case by case basis. When looking at relationships between police and the media, it is found that police are more than likely the leading figure referenced as news developments regarding issues of crime arise (Lawrence, 2000). Not only is law enforcement on the front lines of fighting for justice, but they are also the most frequent first responders to many media or news inquiry at the scene of a crime, as well as the most visible form of government representation in the public eye. Those looking at the trends between police and the media steadily find police in a superior position. They are widely known as the “gatekeepers” of crime and justice news, strategically disrupting the stream of information from reaching the masses (Chibnall, 1977; Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Lawrence, 2000; Lee & McGovern, 2014; Mawby, 2010). However, this relationship is all but stable and can quickly take a sudden shift.

**Institutionally Driven Model.** The institutionally-driven perspective, better described as the “official dominance” model of news production, is revealed in a study conducted by Regina Lawrence (2000), presenting criminal justice agents as legitimate sources in the reporting of facts revolving around crime events. Further identified as “primary definers” or “authorized knowers”, the news’ heavy reliance on police officials as primary sources allows law enforcement the opportunity to frame events in order to benefit the agency (Lawrence, 2000; Lovell, 2003). Police departments use these advantages as ways to create a more positive image, as well as promote an agenda that is in favor of policy issues serving their own interests. This type of news reporting is now systematic and has created a culture of thinking among the public when it comes to crime and justice (Surette, 1998). Hauge (1965) referred to the everyday news reporting

of crime as a monopolized source that, "...presumably makes it an important influence on public opinion on the subject of crime" (p. 148). These "routine" news practices, as explained by Molotch and Lester (as cited in Lawrence, 2000), are the base of the police-media relationship and as such, favor organizations of power by using much of the same ideology when breaking a news story

These agreements set by police and the media are equally advantageous, even in the United Kingdom. In an analysis of British press crime reporting, Chibnall (1977) studied the interviews of crime journalists from local Fleet Street papers, bureau officers of the Scotland Yard Press, as well as talks with other associates of the journalism community to explain how "law-and-order news" reinforces the close-knit partnership between reporters, their sources, and their approach to presenting crime news. Chibnall (1977) criticized the views of the conventional, empirical ideology of Marxists, explaining that their grasp of mass communications was minimal. He believes that those who work in journalism do not simply produce news based on the opinions of their superiors (Balnaves, Donald, Shoemith 2009). According to Chibnall (1977), law and order news represents the link between reporters, their sources and its impact on framing crime news. He continues to reveal that the press protects the image of law enforcement by allowing authorities to refute conflicting claims of misconduct or any other wrongdoing by outside sources. Instead, in the event those types of claims are gaining traction, the particular incident is therefore singled out as being isolated. Reporters are more inclined to legitimate the stories of police officers in order to maintain an open relationship. (Chibnall, 1977).

In a continuation of Chibnall's work, Mawby (2010) puts the English crime reporting standard to the test. He argues his study further proves that police departments still have the

greatest benefit in their relationship with the media, “the relationship remains asymmetric in favor of the police” (Mawby, 2010, p. 1060). After surveying crime reporters, communications specialists and law enforcement from England, Wales and Scotland, Mawby concluded that the relationship between reporter and officer was constantly evolving, making it more challenging to hold police accountable for their story.

Mawby’s (2010) findings include an increased sense of organized communications among police departments with the intensifying of the institutionally driven model. Employees with journalism, communications and public relations backgrounds became normalized within law enforcement agencies for the purpose of shaping and training police officers to interact with the media. With these changes, Mawby (2010) predicts the inevitable decline of crime reporting. According to Hapermas (1989), as departments gain more control of their own narrative they will “practice the distortion of communication with the aim of opinion management” (as cited in Mawby, 2010, p. 1090).

With the advancements in technology, and the thirst for news production, the expansion of police communications departments further gave law enforcement an advantage over media outlets, especially those at the local level. As a result, many news sources have relied points of view already framed by the police, “Journalists now do not use enough sources, they take the police, council, agency releases at face value” (Mawby, 2010, p.1067). The age of the internet has called for news sources such as blogs and online newspapers to report news in real time, as it happens. With media outlets trying to turn out news as fast as it occurs, they often resort to statements issued by the authorities for their information.

Another example of the institutionalized driven model takes place in Australia, where Lee and McGovern (2014) take a look at policing in the region and discover distinct similarities

to other research in the law enforcement's relationship with the media. The authors describe police agencies as "privileged" in their ability to control the information used in crime and justice stories and have the most impact on how they are presented to the public. With the emergence of social media and reality television, Lee and McGovern explain the cultural shift that has simultaneously changed the purpose of the media in its reporting. They believe that this shift, "has opened up a range of new opportunities for police organizations to deliver preferred images to a public hungry for images of crime and justice" (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 6).

**Event-Driven Model.** A majority of the research compiled of the relationship between the media and law enforcement remains consistent along with the history of how our society receives information. Much of the news reporting that exists has consisted of an institutionalized culture that thrives off of its capability of setting the tone for public opinion. Lawrence (2000) provides a theory that not only counters the official dominance model, but arguably disrupts its entire problem construction. In the battle of routine news versus accidental news, she differentiates the two by describing accidental events as unexpected, dramatic and requiring officials to act in response to news as opposed to comfortably constructing the news narrative, with unconventional voices becoming the center of the news agenda. Lawrence (2000) highlights, despite media's loyalty to the police, that there are instances where the use of sources that are considered outsider or "non-official" are inevitable and may very well jeopardize police legitimacy. Even then, important voices and perspectives are often undervalued and left out of the equation unless a high-profile incident containing questionable use of force takes place. The coverage surrounding the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles was used to personify the event driven model.

Lawrence (2000) introduces the beating of Rodney King as an “outlier” case and describes the factors that cause the uncharacteristic response by the media. Three main points contributed to the unusual coverage of police use-of-force: 1) the incident was caught on video; 2) the responses to the event made by officials and political figures; 3) the response of the general public to the event. The impact of the incident being videotaped was critical, but the way the events were taped structured the storyline in a way that heavily influenced the narrative and told a different story from the usual official response (Lawrence, 2000). Moreover, an avenue opened for voices in the community to react. Lawrence (2000) described how the Rodney King case and others alike become high-profile incidents with a series of “critical story cues” (p. 87). They determine how cases involving police officers using questionable force are depicted in the news. According to Lawrence (2000), high profile cases receive coverage in about ten articles or more. With the increase in coverage, comes the first cue which is the increased probability for non-official sources to gain traction. Sources such as witnesses, family members, and coroners, as well as the difference in race between officers and citizens brings “good news” to journalists who look for claims that may go against the reports of institutional voices. The media also searches for cues involving the reaction of political operatives as well as the push back of communities whose intent is to counter the agendas set by officials. Recurring public appearances to control the narratives of stories involving law enforcement indicate to the press the issue is newsworthy.

When asked “what makes use-of-force cases newsworthy?” journalists provided several responses. Factors that bring the police reported version of events into question amplify the newsworthiness of a story, including: the willingness of victims, families, or witnesses to challenge the police version of events; the presence of videotape contradicting police accounts;

and the availability of physical evidence, such as serious injuries to the suspect, that calls official claims into question (Lawrence, 2000). Journalists all mentioned the race of the suspect and the officer as an important determinant of newsworthiness. Political context, such as previous controversial use-of-force incidents or the public response that followed a particular incident, was also mentioned as an indicator of newsworthiness (Lawrence, 2000).

### **What Do We Know About Killings by Police Officers?**

*“If your statistics look just at dead bodies you’d be under-counting it by 85 percent.” “If the cops are shooting, we need to know when they are shooting, not just when they kill somebody with the bullets.”*

- David A. Klinger

The very first court case questioning an officer’s decision to use deadly force was Tennessee v. Garner in 1985, where the officer involved shot an unarmed teenager who was running away from him. The officer fired his weapon under the interpretation of the Tennessee statute that allows law enforcement to “use all the necessary means to affect the arrest,” an interpretation that the U.S. Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional (Lewis, 1986, p. 673; Gross, 2016; Barchenger, 2015). In an era of statistical data and well-kept records, there should be a simple answer to the question of what we know about killings involving police officers.

In an overview of national and local data released by the U.S. Department of Justice, Adams (1999) determined with “substantial” confidence that incidents of police use of force occur few and far between; encounters resulting in bodily harm are even less likely to occur (Adams, 1999). Similarly, William Geller and Michael Scott align with the belief that police involved shootings are much rarer compared to other police encounters with the public (Geller &

Scott, 1992). In a study covering 7,512 arrests, less than twenty percent of the incidents required an officer's use of physical force, which included the use of any restraint, weapon or force without a weapon (roughly eighty percent) (Adams et al., 1999). With modest confidence and based on research data, Adams (1999) challenges the notion that age, race, sex or any other personal trait has a direct link to use of force. On the contrary, law enforcement use of force occurs more often in situations when citizens are under the influence of a controlled substance or alcohol, or those experiencing mental health issues. The Washington Post (2016) reported that out of 991 police involved shootings in 2015, 25 percent of the people killed showed some type of indication of mental illness. Furthermore, officers involved in use of force encounters are part of a small population. Each of these claims lack stable evidence and should receive more research. Studies have shown that African Americans are being shot by police officers at rates disproportionate to the general population (Geller & Scott, 1992). Blacks living in large cities in the 1970's, such as those living in Chicago, were nearly four times more likely to be shot than whites; blacks living in New York City were six times more to be shot than whites (Geller & Scott, 1992). The disparity between police shootings of blacks and whites in America has continued to grow. According to the latest study by ProPublica, a nonprofit, independent investigative journalism group, the risk of young black males being fatally shot by police is 21 times greater than their white counterparts (Gabrielson, Grochowski, & Sagara, 2014). Although evidence suggests that African Americans are killed by police at a rate much higher than any other race or ethnicity, research by Geller and Scott (1992) demonstrate there is no evidence that supports the notion that any one characteristic (race ethnicity experience age) of a police officer leads to violent behavior while on duty. Furthermore, officers that are involved in use of force encounters are part of a small population of police officers. Adams (1999) is also clear to

mention that each of these claims require more research, but organizations like the Center for Disease Control argue that police involved shootings disproportionately affect African Americans, acknowledging that they make up 13.2 percent of the U.S. population and 27.6 percent of the deaths caused by law enforcement (Amnesty International, 2015).

According to Adams (1999), wrongful use of force by police officers is a subject that has very little background and is in dire need of further research. The consistencies between low use of force rates and rare occurrences involving bodily injuries to citizens suggest that excessive force is infrequent. What lacks is the official statistical data that supports this claim. As it stands, there is no standard to measuring excessive force committed by law enforcement. The opinions of Geller and Scott (1992) run parallel to Adams, noting that there is nothing new about records regarding police involved shootings being inaccessible to the public. As far back as the 1970s, records documented by newspapers were one of the only references available to study police involved shootings. In other instances, police involved shootings were tracked through public health records with the US Public Health Services National Center under coroner and medical examiner records identified as “deaths by legal intervention of the police”. Many of those records however, often omit information. Vital Statistics records show 200-350 citizens die by “legal intervention” on average each year (Geller & Scott, 1992). Researchers challenge these estimates and pose that they are underreported by up to 50% statewide, across the United States and even up to 75% in some of the cities with larger populations (Geller & Scott, 1992).

The Uniform Crime Reporting system created by the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been used by researchers since the 1940s to research police involved shootings. The voluntary reports are identified in a study by Sherman and Cohn showing a 54% inconsistency rating among “justified” homicides reported (as cited in Geller & Scott, 1992). According to Amnesty

International (2015), only 6,328 out of over 18,000 police agencies have reported data through the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) for the Uniform Crime Report. Although the reports provide justifiable homicides by firearms, it is not clear how any of the other incidents ended deadly, many of which are omitted because the shooting was yet to be “justified” or the victim was not an alleged to felon (Amnesty International, 2015). Better defined as, “the killing of a felon by a law enforcement officer in the line of duty,” justified homicides were being reported to the FBI at an average of 428 cases each year from 2010 to 2014 (Amnesty International, 2015, p. 9; Police Executive Research Forum, 2016). Legislation, like the Violent Crime Control and Enforcement Act of 1994, made attempts to capture some type of accountability, requiring the Department of Justice to collect and publish statistics on use of force by police (Amnesty International, 2015). The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) instituted a database in 1996 geared toward documenting law enforcement organization’s encounters that concluded in use-of-force (Adams, 1999). Like the Uniform Crime Report, it allowed agencies to report all incidents coming from their respective department as an anonymous participant. Records from 1996 to 1997 show 62,411 events with about five percent involving a gun. (Adams, 1999).

Today, the troubles continue as the United States still does not track how many people are killed by police. The Bureau’s own, current Director James B. Comey, believes the data reporting structures of today “fail to provide a full picture of how often, and under what circumstances, police in the United States use force” (Police Executive Research Forum, 2016, p. 6). As recent as June of 2015 new legislation was proposed by U.S. Senators Cory Booker and Barbara Boxer regarding the reporting of police involved shootings (Amnesty International, 2015). The PRIDE Act called on each state to provide a report each year to the Attorney General

of all incidents involving an officer using force on a civilian that resulted in bodily injury or death. As it stands, all fifty states are noncompliant with international regulations regarding the use of lethal force by law enforcement and some cases; the laws fall short of U.S. standards (Amnesty International, 2015). In a review by Amnesty International (2015), “Nine states and Washington DC currently have no laws on use of lethal force by law enforcement officers; and thirteen states have laws that do not even comply with the lower standards set by US constitutional law on use of lethal force by law enforcement officers” (p. 2). Currently, no state law contains a statute on accountability for use of force, such as requiring a report when police have used a firearm lethally (Amnesty International, 2015, p. 5).

### **Media, Police and Police Shootings**

The media dedicates a substantial amount of time to stories surrounding crime. Ranking number four in space and time on television and in print, crime incidents are predicted to appear once out of every five stories, (Chermak 1994b; Poindexter, Smith, and Heider 2003). When looking specifically at events involving a police officer’s decision to use deadly force, the frequency of occurrences shrink tremendously (Pate & Friddell, 1993). However, in recent years the news coverage of police violence has hit center stage, becoming one of the most trending topics among all facets of media. Hirschfield and Simon (2010) describe how police violence has been integrated into American culture by the media with three “police archetypes” that provide predetermined opinions about police and suspects. The police “professional” represent a well-respected member of the working class who understood how to be fair and just when it came to making decisions regarding use of force. The opposite archetype, the “vigilante”, a product of “popular justice” or taking matters into their own hands, historically responded to anyone who

posed a dangerous threat with deadly force. As government became more centralized, the vigilante began to fade while still remaining prevalent in the public's eye as well as the media's. Hirschfield and Simon (2010) believed that restricting police power caused a hike in crime. Present day police vigilantes have replaced deadly force with police brutality. The last image of violent police is the "oppressor," often linked to the civil-rights era and described as an, "agent of repression who redeems their victims" (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010, p. 158).

When it comes to police violence in the news, deadly force in particular, seeps outside the traditional frame of limited coverage (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). According to Hirschfield and Simon (2010), the institutionally driven model is deeply rooted in news coverage connected to police-involved homicides. In a study, Hirschfield & Simon (2010) reviewed 105 newspaper articles on police use of deadly force from 23 newspapers, painting the issue of deadly force and police racism as problems within an established system. Often portraying police officers as "honest and heroic public servants," news organizations are in a constant battle with established narratives regarding violent incidents involving police officers (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). On the other hand, the ability for law enforcement to frame certain social groups as illegitimate or a "grave threat" during deadly encounters allows for the media to strategically depict police violence as legitimate. There are however, instances where the series of events can overwhelm the dominant model. Hirschfield and Simon (2010) give an example of this paradigm shift with the killing of Amadou Diallo at the hands of New York police officers who showered forty-one rounds toward Diallo, landing nineteen of them after mistaking his wallet for a gun. Diallo, an immigrant, was unarmed and without a criminal record. After the clearing of the officers involved, immense uprising among protesters was uncontrollable as it became clear that issues of

racism within the police department and senseless use of deadly force were institutionalized in their eye.

This chapter has defined the police-media relationship and how it has developed over time. Police violence has evolved into a celebrity-like entity, spewing out of radio receivers and television sets for our entertainment in record numbers. It has blended in the American culture with reality shows and television dramas inspired by officers enforcing the law, making the difference between authenticity and fantasy unclear. Lawrence (2000) unveils two models that describe the way news is reported and how they are used in stories involving law enforcement. The institutionally driven model structures news reporting in a way that urges the public to adopt many of the images legitimized to describe police, as well as the characteristics of those who they believe deserve to be brought to justice by police. However, these events are now being captured by the hands of technology, making the official dominance by the media difficult to maintain. The event-driven model has created a wedge in the relationship between media and the authorities for the sake of a good news story.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Exploratory analysis was the methodology used to conduct this research. The dataset was compiled of a wide ranged sample of newspaper articles, radio and television transcripts and magazine articles. Articles were taken from local and national media sources primarily through unofficial databases created by *The Guardian* and *Wikipedia*. These “unofficial databases” were used for data collection because currently no official database of police involved shootings exists; the only records available are self-reported by law enforcement agencies (Lowery 2014). Additional articles were obtained from google searches containing keywords that would provide updated articles. Sources were selected due to their coverage of the cases in this study, indexed with the victim’s name followed by the words “killing” and/or “shooting”. Sources were also selected based on suggested coverage from the databases used to identify cases. Applicable news coverage from each of these media sources were then acknowledged for the designated timeframe. Particular attention was paid to the “Breaking News” and “Crime” sections of the media sources. The victim’s full name along with the original search terms were used in order to boost search results. Media coverage found through the search for the victim’s full name along with search terms “killing”, “shooting” and the date of the killing were coded based on guidelines used in Lawrence’s (2000) study of police use of force. Each article was numbered and coded by year and month. Each article was assigned an “ID” number as well as a “shoot number” and coded by the name of the media outlet, the type of media source, the section of the news if any, and the length of the coverage.

The data sample comprised of articles from weekday and weekend news stories collected within a 2-and-a-half-year time frame, from 2013 to 2015. All articles found applicable to police shootings in Florida were used for the analysis given that the use of deadly force could be confirmed; a total of 199 articles were used in the analyses. All persons in this study were identified as victims instead of suspects because they were subject to deadly force used by law enforcement. The analysis took a quantitative approach, adopting principles outlined by Lawrence (2000) to examine media coverage of police and police involved killings in Florida following the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012. To create a better understanding of the trends over time, stories from the Trayvon Martin killing in 2012 were used as the starting point. The focus was on personal characteristics of the victims, which addressed the second research question as to whether or not those components played a significant role in the coverage that the event received.

Articles were coded to identify victims as well as the number of articles connected to that particular shooting. A data collection outline was used when reviewing articles on police involved shootings (see Appendix A.). Information was recorded regarding the victim's age, race, gender, any criminal background and whether the victim was armed at the time of the incident. The race of the victim used in this analysis was identified by the race that was provided in the news source. If race was not explicitly stated in the article, a photograph was used to identify race when available. The coding of each article in its entirety included particular information about the location and region in which each case took place, along with the cause of death, the number of witnesses, the number of officers involved and the officer's violent history if any was present. If information was not present within the news source it was not assumed to be absent to avoid introducing any bias. For example, if an article did not mention the mental

condition of the victim it was not assumed that the victim did not have a mental condition. This limited the sample size of some of the variables of interest. It also did not allow for a comparison group within those variables, and for that reason these were left out of the regression analyses.

## **Data Analysis**

Regression models and descriptive statistics were used to examine coverage by the media on killings involving law enforcement and whether there are noticeable shifts in coverage over time, after the death of Trayvon Martin. Descriptive statistics were gathered using cross tabulations in SPSS in order to identify demographics and specifics regarding the encounter between the victim and law enforcement. From this, the first research question, whether or not coverage of police's use of lethal force showed trends of increased coverage over time after the Trayvon Martin shooting, was addressed. Exploratory data analysis was conducted using box plots, visual trend plots and T-tests between years. Box plots plotted the distribution of word count by year. Visual trends were plotted using a Lowess smoothing line to show the trend of the average word count over time. Pairwise T-tests were conducted to compare the differences in word count between years. The assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity were assessed for the T-test.

Further quantitative analysis examined the age, race and the sex of the victim, demographic factors that were previously identified as being associated with media reporting of police shootings in the articles collected and in the literature (Campbell 2012). These variables, and other factors that may have played a role in the media coverage such as the media source, the location of the shooting, victim's mental illness, etc., were then put into a data dictionary to

guide data collection. Because the outcome of interest was a count variable, log-linear models for count data were used to assess the relationship between word count and the victim's race, age and sex. The assumption for the Poisson model that the variance is equal to the mean was evaluated and upon violation, a negative binomial model was used for this analysis. All analysis was completed in SPSS.

## Chapter 4: Results

This study measured how the media portrayed police involved shootings in Florida. A substantial sample of news coverage was acquired, so that if there was a shift in coverage over time, the trend would be noticeable on a visual scale, although there was no guarantee for statistical significance. Coding involved a total of 199 stories covering 86 different shootings. Of those stories, 81 names were retrieved of which only 10 individuals could not be racially identified. Newspaper articles were the most frequent among sources gathered. Media coverage consisted of 91 (45.7%) Newspaper articles, 67 (33.7%) television stories, 35 (17.6%) stories from internet sources, 2 (.01%) radio transcripts, 1 (.005%) magazine article and 3 (.02%) stories from other sources.

Table I describes the relationship between media reports and the demographic characteristics of victims of police involved shootings in Florida from January 2013 to June of 2015. Included in the table are the age, average word count of media report, race, and sex of the victim by year, along with other variables that were not included in the regression analysis. There were 85 killings identified between January 2013 and June 2015, excluding the Trayvon Martin incident, with a total of 179 articles covering these cases. The majority of the victims (55%) reportedly killed by police were White. Black victims comprised the second largest group with 39 deaths (27%), followed by Hispanics with 24 deaths (17%). Most of the victims were reported as being armed at the scene of the incident (72.9%; N=129) compared to those unarmed

(20%; N=45). Stories overwhelmingly covered male victims, with 162 (92%) stories compared to female victims who only represented 14 stories (8%).

The shootings occurred across the state pretty evenly with the North Florida Region having 28(32.9%) cases, the South Florida Region with 27(31.8%) incidents and the Central Florida Region barely trailing with 23(27.0%). According to reports of total population of Florida Counties based on 2012 census estimates by US-Places.com (n.d.), the geographic distribution of shootings compares to a total population of 5,043,847(26%) in the North Florida Region. The Black population in the North Region is just under one million people at 854,409, which makes up about 17% of the region's residents. The southern region had the largest population (8,061,823), making up approximately 42% of the state with a black population of 1,459,634, accounting for 18% of the region. Central Florida consists of 6,204,549(32%) people and a black population of 893,519(14%) regionally (US-Places.com, n.d.). Reports showed 45.8% of the shootings in the two and a half years studied occurred in residential neighborhoods (N=82). Shootings on public property were just as frequent (40.7%; N=73). A little over 32% (N=58) of the stories in this research made mention of the victim having a criminal record of some sort while only just under 7%(N=12) of reports claim victims had no previous run in with the law. Out of 179 articles post the Travon Martin incident, over half (53%) did not name the officer involved in the deadly encounter. Approximately 47% identified the shooting police officer. All officers identified in the shootings were male.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of Victims in Police Involved Shootings Post Trayvon Martin, January 2013-June 2015 (N=179)

	<b>2013</b> N=23(12.8%)	<b>2014</b> N=88(49.2%)	<b>2015</b> N=68(38%)	<b>Total</b> N=179(100%)
<b>Race</b>				
White	8(44)	31(54)	39(58)	78(55)
Hispanic	2(11)	16(28)	6(9)	24(17)
Black	7(39)	10(18)	22(33)	39(27)
Asian	0	0	0	0
Middle Eastern	1(6)	0	0	1(0.7)
Other	0	0	0	0
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	21 (95)	74 (85)	67(100)	162(92)
Female	1(5)	13 (15)	0	14(8)
<b>Age (mean ± SD)</b>	37 ± 16	35 ± 12	34 ± 10	35 ± 11
<b>Word (mean ± SD)</b>	696 ± 376	454 ± 261	433 ± 351	476 ± 336
<b>Media Source</b>				
Newspaper	16(69.6)	35(39.8)	21(31)	72(40.2)
Radio	0	1(1)	1(2)	2(1)
News Station	5(21.7)	32(36.4)	30(44)	67(37.4)
Internet Sources	2(.09)	17(19.3)	16(23.5)	35(19.6)
Other	0	3(.03)	0	3(2)
Total	23	88	68	179
<b>News Section</b>				
Breaking News	10	1	0	11
News	4	30	0	34
Crime	2	6	0	8
Local	0	0	1	1
Other	3	1	2	6
<b>Shooting Location</b>				
Residential Property	7	39	36	82
Public Property	3	43	27	73
Other	3	0	0	3
<b>Armed Victim</b>				
Yes	19	69	41	129
No	2	16	27	45
<b>Victim Weapon Type</b>				
Firearm	14	51	24	89
Knife	2	9	5	16
Taser	0	9	0	9
Vehicle	0	4	4	8
Other	3	0	6	9

**Table 1 Continued:** Characteristics of Victims in Police Involved Shootings Post Trayvon Martin, January 2013-June 2015 (N=179)

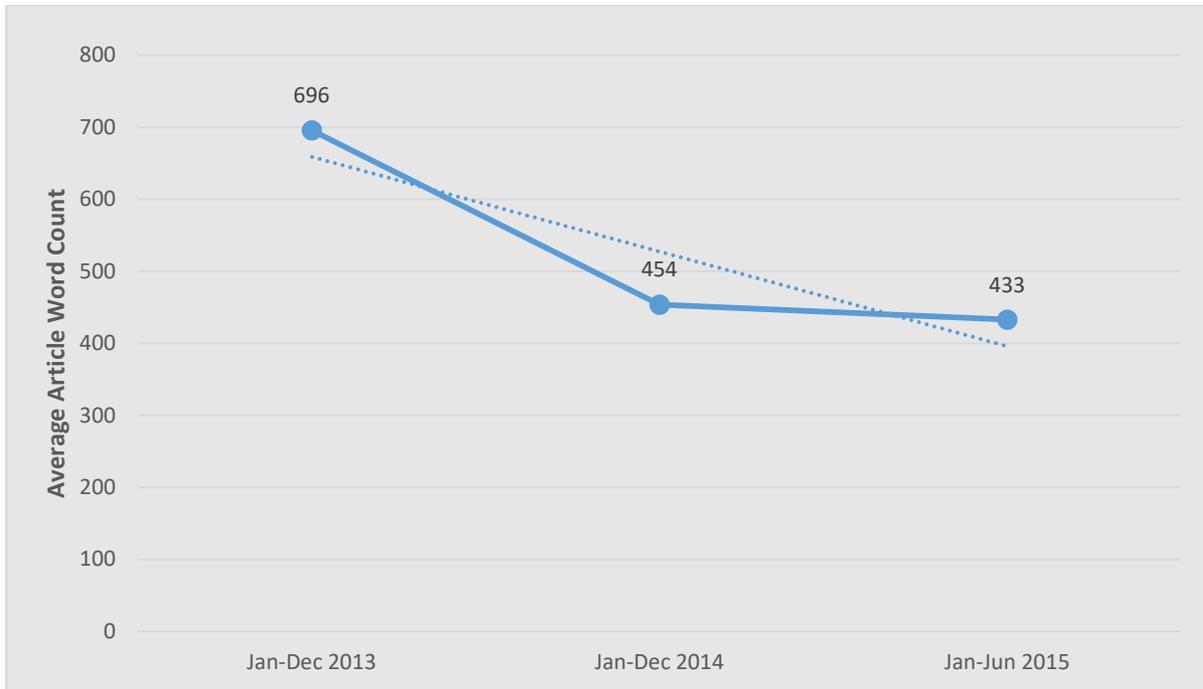
	<b>2013</b> N=23(12.8%)	<b>2014</b> N=88(49.2%)	<b>2015</b> N=68(38%)	<b>Total</b> N=179(100%)
<b>Criminal Record</b>				
Yes	11	25	22	58
No	11	0	1	12
<b>Victim's Mental Illness</b>				
Schizophrenia	0	4	2	6
Depression	1	0	0	1
PTSD				
Other	3	7	5	15
<b>Victims w/ Disabilities</b>				
Developmental Disability				
Physical Disability	0	2	0	2
<b>Police Officer Involved in Shooting</b>				
One Officer	2	17	27	46
Two Officers	4	30	12	46
Three Officers	5	9	3	17
Four Officers	2	0	4	6
Five Officers	0	1	1	1
Six Officers	2	0	2	4
<b>Sex of Officer #1</b>				
Male	7	48	37	92
<b>Sex of Officer #2</b>				
Male	3	18	8	29
Female	0	0	2	2
<b>Race of Officer #1</b>				
White	-	-	-	-
Hispanic	1	2	0	3
Black	0	1	0	1
Asian	-	-	-	-
Middle Eastern	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-
<b>Officer Violent History</b>				
Yes	1	3	3	7
<b>Type of Investigation</b>				
Internal	0	0	2	2
Internal, External Local	0	1	0	1
External Local	0	8	3	11
External Local, External State	0	1	0	1

**Table 1 Continued:** Characteristics of Victims in Police Involved Shootings Post Trayvon Martin, January 2013-June 2015 (N=179)

	<b>2013</b> N=23(12.8%)	<b>2014</b> N=88(49.2%)	<b>2015</b> N=68(38%)	<b>Total</b> N=179(100%)
<b>Type of Killing</b>				
Righteous Shoot	20	58	35	113
Questionable Shoot	1	11	12	24
Suicide by Cop	1	8	6	15
Wrongful Use of Force	0	9	7	16
Other	1	2	7	10

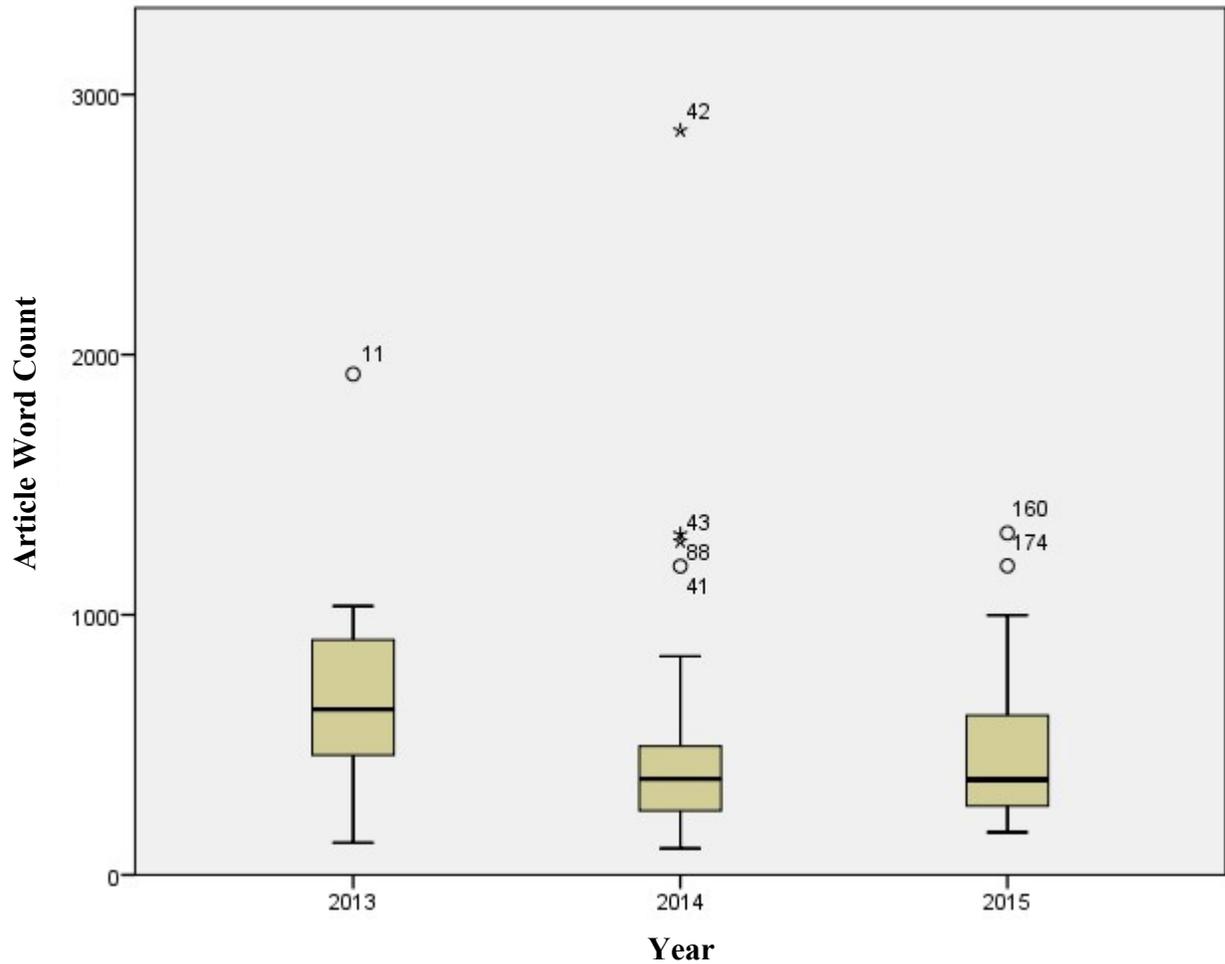
Note: Table depicts only information available from news sources used for data collection.

The reports covering police shootings after the Trayvon Martin incident were relatively short. The average length of a story covering Martin was about 880 words. As seen in Chart 1, the average length of coverage of stories in the year 2013 (696 words) fell below the average of length of articles covering the Trayvon Martin incident. In the two years that followed, the amount of coverage dropped dramatically, with articles averaging under 500 words in both 2014 (454 words) and 2015 (433 words). Only eleven stories (6.1%) in the data sample were classified as breaking news. Thirty-four stories (19%) were highlighted in the news section and seven (3.9%) of the shootings were within the crime section.



**Figure 1:** Average Article Word Count Post Trayvon Martin By Year, January 2013-June 2015

Several articles in the dataset were outliers, with word counts that exceeded beyond the average for other articles within that particular year. Chart 2 shows the frequency of the media coverage length, with seven of the articles presenting as outliers based on the article word count. These articles are depicted as points on Chart 2 with their associated article number. As the average word count per article declined, the number of outlier stories increased. The year 2013 begins with a low frequency of articles that are much longer than the average articles for that year. Transitioning into 2014, there is a considerable decline in the average article length that remains consistent into 2015 with the same number of outlying articles inflating the mean word length.



**Figure 2: Distribution of Article Word Count Post Trayvon Martin by Year, January 2013-June 2015**

Linear regression was used to decide if a link was present between the length of an article covering police use of lethal-force and age, race and sex of the victim. This was first with a Poissonian model and then with a negative binomial regression. Model fit statistics were used to evaluate each regression model to identify which model was most appropriate to analyze the data. The Poisson model fit diagnostic statistics fluctuated greatly between -14201.14 and 34497.528, with an Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) of 2,146.84, as seen in Table 2. The goodness of fit statistics showed an over dispersed Poisson model with a deviance of 27241.066.

**Table 2:** Goodness of Fit Statistics of the Poisson Regression Model

	Value	Df	Value/df
Deviance	27241.066	140	194.579
Scaled Deviance	110.551	140	
Pearson Chi-Square	34497.528	140	246.411
Scaled Pearson Chi-Square	140.000	140	
Log Likelihood <sup>b</sup>	-14201.140		
Adjusted Log Likelihood	-57.632		
Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC)	28414.280		
Finite Sample Corrected AIC (AICC)	28414.885		
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	28432.182		
Consistent AIC (CAIC)	28438.182		

Notes: Dependent Variable: Words; Model: (Intercept), Hispanic, Black, Middle Eastern, Sex, AgeVic<sup>a</sup>

Despite this over dispersion present in the Poissonian model, it was still run to see if any difference in estimates between the two models would exist. The model estimates can be found in Table 3. The Poisson model revealed that none of the covariates had a significant relationship with police officers use of deadly force. Compared to Whites, Hispanic victims showed the least significant relationship (p-value= 0.73) followed by and then Black (p-value= 0.46). The Middle Eastern victim has no results because 1 case is insufficient representation. However, a significant relationship was found between age and word count (p-value= 0.02).

**Table 3: Poisson Regression Analysis of News Article Word County by Race, Gender, and Age**

Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test		
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	Df	Sig.
(Intercept)	6.687	.2161	6.264	7.111	957.611	1	.000
[Hispanic=1.00]	-.052	.1829	-.410	.307	.080	1	.777
[Hispanic=.00]	0a	.	.	.	.	.	.
[Black=1.00]	.098	.1332	-.163	.359	.542	1	.462
[Black=.00]	0a	.	.	.	.	.	.
MiddleEastern=1.00]	-.270	.7568	-1.753	1.213	.127	1	.721
[MiddleEastern=.00]	0a	.	.	.	.	.	.
Female	-.348	.2633	-.864	.168	1.748	1	.186
Male	0a	.	.	.	.	.	.
AgeVic	-.012	.0054	-.023	-.002	5.218	1	.022
(Scale)	246.411b						

Note: Dependent Variable: Words; Model: (Intercept), Hispanic, Black, MiddleEast, Sex, AgeVic

The fit statistics of the second regression analysis using a negative binomial regression model to look at the variables of age, race sex and their impact on the length of media coverage on police involved shootings can be found in Table 4. The model fit statistics ranged from -1064.184 to 2158.286 with an AIC of 2138.368. The goodness of fit statistics also showed that Negative Binomial model was a much better fit for the data, with a deviance of 50.346. The results of the negative binomial regression analysis can be found in Table 5. These results demonstrated that none of the covariates had a significant relationship with length of media articles covering the cases. Compared to Whites, Hispanic victims showed the least significant relationship (p-value= 0.73) followed by Black victims (p-value 0.23). The Middle Eastern victim has no results because 1 case is an insufficient representation.

**Table 4:** Goodness of Fit Statistics of the Negative Binomial Regression Model

	Value	Df	Value/df
Deviance	50.346	141	.357
Scaled Deviance	50.346	141	
Pearson Chi-Square	68.085	141	.483
Scaled Pearson Chi-Square	68.085	141	
Log Likelihood <sup>b</sup>	-1064.184		
Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC)	2138.368		
Finite Sample Corrected AIC (AICC)	2138.796		
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	2153.286		
Consistent AIC (CAIC)	2158.286		

Notes: Dependent Variable: Words; Model: (Intercept), Hispanic, Black, MiddleEastern, Sex, AgeVic<sup>a</sup>

**Table 5:** Negative Binomial Regression Analysis of News Article Word County by Race, Gender, and Age

Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test		
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	Df	Sig.
(Intercept)	6.225	.1243	5.981	6.468	2507.223	1	.000
[Hispanic=1.00]	.087	.2530	-.409	.583	.119	1	.731
[Hispanic=.00]	0 <sup>a</sup>	.	.	.	.	.	.
[Black=1.00]	.222	.1853	-.141	.585	1.434	1	.231
[Black=.00]	0 <sup>a</sup>	.	.	.	.	.	.
[MiddleEast=1.00]	-.142	1.0088	-2.120	1.835	.020	1	.888
[MiddleEast=.00]	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Female	-.373	.3218	-1.003	.258	1.342	1	.247
Male	0 <sup>a</sup>	.	.	.	.	.	.
AgeVic (Scale)	-.012	.0077	-.028	.003	2.535	1	.111

Note: Dependent Variable: Words; Model: (Intercept), Hispanic, Black, Middle Eastern, Sex, AgeVic

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

It is the hopes that the findings, conclusions, implications and suggestions from these analyses will make some type of contribution to the study of news coverage, the media and their relationship with law enforcement. For the reader's reference, this chapter will contain a brief overview of the study, including a statement of the problem and the methods used. Most of this chapter however, is dedicated to a summary and discussion of the three research questions and a discussion of the pertinence of the results for the role of media in police involved shootings in Florida.

Overall, after examining this topic in more depth, it is apparent that mass media's portrayal of police involved shootings in the state of Florida need to be further investigated. It has also been intriguing to consider the relationship between the media and law enforcement agencies as it relates to framing news for the general public. In addressing mass media's impact, Mughal (2013) has said, "We have put our trust on the media as an authority to give us news...The media has a huge impact on society in shaping the public opinion of the masses". The purpose of this research was to help make sense of current tendencies, strong points and flaws of media reporting of shootings involving police officers.

This paper set out to raise a series of questions and point to a few directions in beginning to answer them: Was there an increase or decrease in the frequency, as well as the volume of reporting related to law enforcement deadly use-of-force following the killing of Trayvon Martin? Were there any major differences in media reporting between victims based on age, sex

and race? What type of influence did media have on society? How does the media cover crime and justice news? What Do We Know About Killings by Police Officers? How does the media handle police involved shootings? The foundation of the paper uses Lawrence's (2000) framework of the institutionally driven and event driven models by looking at media coverage of police involved shootings in Florida after the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

One could assume from this analysis that the media has in some instances kept the issue of police involved shootings in the headlines, but at the same time have downplayed the need to make it a real nationwide issue. Specifically speaking, despite the apparent rise, media has been reserved in their coverage of police involved shootings, a topic that needs much more attention.

As introduced in the literature review portion of this research, the media has historically been a manipulator of public opinion by controlling the narratives of the news they distribute to the masses. They frame socio-political agendas by focusing on specific characteristics of a storyline or by simply disregarding certain pieces of information. As it pertains to police involved shootings in Florida, the media, represented by a variety of news sources across the United States, focuses on three major goals: 1. presenting newsworthy stories that will maintain an audience. 2. Controlling the narrative of the news. 3. Sustaining a strong working relationship with law enforcement.

In Florida, the number of police involved shootings covered by the media has increased tremendously, even though the total number of shootings has remained steady. The Poissonian regression analysis revealed that the race or gender of a victim killed by police made no major difference in the way the media covered the occurrence, while there was a significant association present between length of media coverage and the victim's age. However, the complexity of the

data with its many outliers due to high profile cases, caused the model to be over dispersed. With a Pearson dispersion statistic substantially greater than 1 (134,939.332), the assumptions of the model were not met. The negative binomial regression proved to be a better fit for the data as over dispersion decreased, producing a much lower deviance.

The negative binomial regression model revealed there were no significant relationships between the demographic characteristics of the victims considered in the analysis and the length of the news article covering these cases. Similar results were reflected in other studies that looked at the age, race and sex of police officers (Geller, Scott 1992). While appearing to be a better alternative than the Poisson regression model, the negative binomial regression model remained unfit due to the number of outliers in the data, causing conflicting issues with the normality of the model. Transforming the data to increase normality is not an option in this case, considering the spikes in media coverage are of particular interest.

Although the regression models used for analysis were unable to support my hypotheses, it is clear that there was a shift in media coverage of police shootings as time progressed. The timing of this rise in media coverage could be due to vast increase in public unrest and protest. After finding that the coverage of police involved shootings was consistently low throughout the study, it is evident that an individual incident did not reflect broader shifts in how media covered them. Hence, it seems probable that the surge in coverage was explicitly linked to deadly use of force by law enforcement becoming more 'newsworthy'.

Despite the findings that age, race or gender of the victim did not significantly influence the amount of coverage an incident received, the absence of information within the cases is also very telling. Missing information from media sources was similarly a common tendency in this study. In many instances, the name of the officer involved in the encounter was not mentioned. It

is reasonable to assume that all of the details regarding the incident had not yet been reported, therefore a full investigation could not be completed. Having a more complete account of events could have greatly influence the research findings.

## **Research Limitations**

Though the research has reached its purposes, there were some inevitable limitations. The time available to conduct research was two collegiate semesters; due to time restrictions, the research data that was collected only covered the Trayvon Martin story in 2012 and incidents from January 2013 to June 2015. Thus, results may have had a different outcome if the study included incidents from all of 2012 as well as years prior, and also would have allowed for a more robust comparison. This timeframe also limited the data to a relatively small sample size, consisting of only eighty-six shootings. This further limited the ability to analyze the relationship with specific characteristics extracted from the media coverage of these incidents. Statistical models typically require large data samples to guarantee an accurate depiction of the population that is being tested, and maintain statistical power.

The reliability of the data source may have also impacted findings. The sources used to identify the shootings were not official sources, but databases created on both public blogs and independent websites. To an extent, the results may have been affected because these databases were often updated by members of the public. Therefore, the cases used for the analysis may not adequately represent police-involved shootings as a whole. There may be some reporting bias, with individuals contributing to these databases after experiencing their own loss or after a particular encounter with police officers.

Finally, only searching for news coverage through a general search engine rather than a news database like LexisNexis Academic potentially limits the amount of news coverage found on a particular incident, therefore the current results may not provide enough evidence to relay the full impact of reports by the media on police involved shootings. A small sample size as well as the lack of reliable data contributes to the difficulty to find important relationships between variables. The lack of prior research studies on this topic leaves the opportunity for further research to be conducted.

## **Recommendations**

The research conducted for this project has revealed numerous issues that require additional research. As mentioned in the literature and earlier in this chapter, there were a number of places where information was insufficient. Specifically, there is a lack of data to fit either of the regression models used in these analyses. Future studies might, for instance, look at news coverage in years prior to the Trayvon Martin incident to look for trends over time in correlation with years after Trayvon's death.

Using a qualitative approach would allow researchers to observe the tendencies of the media in framing the narrative of stories covering police using deadly force. Further analysis should take a closer look at what types of people are interviewed in the media in order to see if there are any similarities with the Regina Lawrence's event-driven model (2000). Examining coverage before and after the killing of Trayvon is critical, as it would show whether there were any qualitative changes in the type of coverage media produces.

As the advancement of technology continues to remain on the rise, it's important that research is able to adapt to how media coverage is evolving. According to the Pew Research Center, social media has become a "pathway" to news for 30% of American adults (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). Social media is an avenue available to all types of voices. The opinions of news reporters, law enforcement and the public can be viewed on a Facebook wall or in a twitter post with the views of others in the comments section right below. A network analysis to assess how social media responds to police involved shootings could be used in both the institutional and event-driven model to compare how each community responds to these types of events, as well as how the groups interact with each other as a whole.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a qualitative approach that would further dissect the numerous components found in news coverage. In a handbook describing the characteristics of CDA, Van Dijk (2001) talks about the influence media has on the framing of social stigmas and political agendas. Critical Discourse Analysis examines, "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." (Van Dijk 2001, p. 352). When it comes to studying the media, Roger Fowler's focus of "linguistic tools" such as the "analysis of transitivity in syntax, lexical structure, modality, and speech acts" would allow the study to look at trends in news content over time in addition to volume of coverage over time (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions**

The reporting by the media on police involved shootings shows that the media values their relationship with their “official” sources, including government officials or entity with some type of link to law enforcement. Ultimately, police were portrayed as not having bias in their use of lethal force based on the race, age or gender of the victim. Several research studies have confirmed deep ties between the media and law enforcement, describing components of an institutionalized reporting system as being deliberately bias and in favor of police departments; It has unveiled the great need for a transparent, mandatory reporting system that provides a thorough depiction of the incident on behalf of the officer and the victim.

In answering the research questions presented earlier in this study, results showed that despite the outcomes of the models conducted, media coverage of police involved shootings did receive large amounts of coverage in some cases, but not regularly. The main goal was to create a narrative that would justify an officer’s decision to use deadly force. Much of the coverage posed victims as a danger to society by reporting that they were armed or whether they had a criminal record. In addition, it insists that police are using sound judgment in their decisions to use lethal force. Furthermore, the media is making conscious efforts to delegitimize testimony that sides with the victim.

The question as to whether the media reflects reality or creates it is a valid one. Late British Prime Minister James Callaghan called the media a “mirror held up to society” (Gurevitch et al. 2005: Pg. 285). In other words, the media only reflects what is in front of them.

Linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure believes there is a contrast between what's "real" and what's defined as real (as cited in Gurevitch et al., 2005). So, as the consumer takes in news, is it ok to trust what the media is feeding them, or should the consumer instead be sifting carefully through headlines and punctuation for the "real" reality?

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**Appendix A: Coding Sheet**

<b>Incident</b>		
<b>Location</b>		
	City	
	County	
	Establishment	
<b>Police Chase</b>		
<b>Armed</b>		
<b>Cause of Death</b>		
<b>Footage</b>		
<b>Day of Week/Time</b>		
<b>Victim/Civilian</b>		
	Name	
	Age	
	Race	
	Gender	
	Prior Criminal Offenses	
<b>Mental Illness</b>		
<b>Disability</b>		
<b>Number of Witnesses</b>		
<b>Officers Involved</b>		
	Name	
	Police Dept	
	Age	
	Gender/Race	
	Experience	
	History	
<b>Article: Section/Length (Columns/Word Count) /Photographs</b>		
<b>Section: Breaking News</b>		
<b>Length: Column/ words</b>		
<b>Photographs:</b>		
	News Outlet	
	Who was interviewed	