**| ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Occupational Prestige of Law Enforcement Officers: Quantifying Self and Public Perceptions of Prestige

Katelin M. Alfaro Hudak[1] 🔘 | Aidan Combs[2] | Robert E. Freeland[3] | Elizabeth A. Mumford[1]

[1]Public Health, NORC at the University of Chicago, Bethesda, Maryland, USA | [2]Sociology, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA | [3]Sociology, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

**Correspondence:** Katelin M. Alfaro Hudak (katelin.alfarohudak@ag.tamu.edu)

**ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** Perceptions of occupational prestige are commonly associated with job satisfaction and job turnover intentions, but little is known about how law enforcement officers (LEOs) view the prestige of policing. We quantify how LEOs rate the prestige of policing and how they think their communities view policing. We evaluate the extent to which LEO understandings of public perceptions match actual public perceptions.

**Methods:** We estimated occupational prestige using traditional and multidimensional measures in a nationally representative sample of LEOs.

**Results:** Officers view their occupation as more prestigious, morally good, and active, but less powerful than they believe the public sees it. Officers' understandings of public view of policing are more pessimistic than warranted by the public's actual views. Officers viewed their occupations as less prestigious and believed the public's perceptions of the prestige and "goodness" of policing were significantly lower following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd's murder.

**Conclusions:** Our results highlight the need to study social psychological processes involved in officer self-perceptions and their understanding of the communities with which they interact.

## 1 | Introduction

Law enforcement agencies (LEAs) across the United States (US) are facing a workforce crisis characterized by fewer new applicants and a growing number of resignations and retirements (Police Executive Research Forum 2019). These challenges are occurring amid staffing shortages that many agencies were already experiencing. The number of full-time sworn officers per capita in the US decreased 10.3% from 1997 to 2016 (Hyland 2018). A 2019 national survey conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) mirrors these trends. Forty-one percent of respondents reported that their agency's shortage of officers was worse in 2019 compared to 2014 (PERF 2019). Since 2020, both the social disruption of the COVID pandemic (Davis 2021) and reactions to George Floyd's murder (Mourtgos et al. 2022) have further accelerated departures from law enforcement.

An overall decrease in job satisfaction and an increase in stress may be two key factors driving the challenges in law enforcement officer (LEO) recruitment and retention. An officer's perception of their occupational prestige—that is, societal perceptions of an occupation's social standing—has been linked to both job satisfaction and stress (Bright 2021; Buzawa 1984; Kraus et al. 2013; Yim and Schafer 2009). Furthermore, officers' understanding of public perceptions of the prestige of policing can influence officers' commitment to their agencies (Dutton et al. 1994), turnover intentions (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Kamasak 2011), and job satisfaction (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Kamasak 2011). Therefore, having a better understanding of officers' perceptions of the prestige of policing and how they view the public's perceptions of policing can illuminate one potential mechanism through which to influence job satisfaction and stress. This has implications for increasing police recruitment and retention, as well as improving interactions with the public. That is, if officers are acting based on inaccurate perceptions, these misperceptions can lead to unnecessary conflict.

Literature on police occupational prestige is limited in three ways. First, occupational prestige has typically been measured along a single dimension of relative rank (Nakao and Treas 1994; Smith and Son 2014), reflecting a composite of income, education, and other occupational features (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Treiman 1977). But recent scholarship grounded in classic theories of power (Weber 1978) contends that traditional prestige measures primarily capture objective job characteristics like income and education, missing social power (Freeland and Hooey 2018). Social status, reflecting social estimates of honor, duty, and respect, is an independent basis of power that often operates in opposition to economic power. For instance, some workers are willing to sacrifice pay in exchange for more meaningful work (Hope 1982).

A study by Mumford et al. (2022), based on focus groups with police officers, illustrates the difficulty in conceptualizing and measuring this complex, multifaceted concept. On one hand, they found that objective job features such as understaffing, required overtime, and lack of advancement opportunities were prominent reasons given for burnout and turnover. On the other hand, officers also described policing as a "passion" or "calling" (Mumford et al. 2022). They spoke of prestige not in terms of financial aspects, but in social evaluations of honor, dignity, and respect, which led to increased pride and internal motivation. This research suggests that to more fully understand the role of prestige in policing, researchers must measure prestige via both the traditional, unidimensional and newer, multidimensional approaches.

Additionally, research on prestige and policing has focused on either the officer's perceptions of their profession (Lim et al. 2000) or how the public views the police (Brown and Benedict 2002; Cao et al. 1998) but little research has been conducted on third-person perceptions, that is, what officers believe are the public's perceptions of police officers (Yim and Schafer 2009). This distinction is important because heightened media coverage can lead to distortions of the public's true opinion, leading officers to believe and underestimate the level of esteem and appreciation the public has for their profession (Yim and Schafer 2009).

We aim to further our understanding of the prestige of law enforcement by answering three research questions: (1) how do LEOs rate the prestige of their profession, (2) how do LEOs believe the public would rate the prestige of policing, and (3) to what extent LEO's beliefs accurately reflect the U.S. public's actual ratings of the prestige of policing. This study offers several innovations to the existing literature. It is among the first to employ both traditional and multidimensional measures of prestige, and unlike many studies based on data from a single department or city, this study employs a nationally representative sample of LEOs that provides greater generalizability.

## 2 | Research on Prestige and Status

### 2.1 | Quantifying Occupational Status

Cultural perceptions of honor, service, and respect are central to police work. Officers consistently rank service to others and the pride it elicits as the leading reason for pursuing a career in law enforcement, followed by economic aspects of the job, such as pay and promotion opportunities (Clinkinbeard et al. 2021; Raganella and White 2004; White et al. 2010). The importance of social status was first articulated by Weber (1946), who viewed economic and cultural/social dimensions as related but distinct bases of power. Status rests on the ability of workers, like police officers, to elicit voluntary compliance based on cultural beliefs about how deserving they are of respect and honor. In other words, status provides the basis for the public's compliance before having to resort to force (Hope 1982; Weber 1978, 305).

Occupational prestige scores have been the predominant method for quantifying status. Prestige scores are a unidimensional ranking of relative "social standing" based on the logic that economic power (i.e., control over scarce and valued resources) leads to privilege, which then leads to prestige (Treiman 1977). Traditional prestige measures, therefore, provide an indirect, subjective assessment of socioeconomic job characteristics, especially pay and educational requirements (Bukodi et al. 2011; Freeland and Hooey 2018; Hauser and Warren 1997). Prestige can affect recruitment and retention because prestige provides a succinct summary of the requirements and rewards of occupations.

The assertion that prestige primarily reflects the objective economic aspects of the job while not fully capturing cultural power or status in the Weberian sense of social honor and respect (Featherman and Hauser 1976; Goldthorpe and Hope 1972) can be seen in recent studies of police work. Mumford et al. (2022) found that officers described the pride elicited from performing a "passion" or "calling" and "making a difference" as a separate issue from working conditions such as overtime and staffing. Analyzing the reasons officers in two Midwestern departments gave for choosing a law enforcement career, Clinkinbeard et al. (2021) found that *service*, consisting of responses pertaining to the desire to help and protect others, was the leading factor motivating them, followed by *perks*, consisting of economic rewards such as pay, job security, and prestige.

To address this issue, multidimensional measures of cultural sentiments have recently been employed to quantify both dimensions of status and prestige (Freeland and Hooey 2018; Maloney 2020).

Notably, the semantic differential scale measures three universal affective dimensions of *evaluation* (good vs. bad), *potency* (powerful vs. weak), and *activity* (active vs. quiescent) on bipolar scales ranging from −4 to 4, with 0 being neutral (Heise 2010; Osgood and Tzeng 1990; Osgood et al. 1975). Together, these three dimensions represent a concept's EPA rating (evaluation, potency, and activity) with status and cultural beliefs about esteem and goodness being reflected in the evaluation dimension and prestige and other objective job characteristics in the potency dimension (Freeland and Hooey 2018; Langford and MacKinnon 2000). For example, cultural sentiment data (Quinn et al. 2023) indicates that in the United States in 2019, the mean EPA rating for a police officer was (1.54, 2.35, and 1.87), suggesting that they are perceived by the public as good, very powerful, and quite active. For comparison, cashiers (1.64, −0.54, and 1.17) were viewed with similar levels of goodness but somewhat less active and powerful. This multidimensional approach has proven useful in the study of occupational prestige and inequality (Freeland and Harnois 2020; Freeland and Hooey 2018; Moore and Robinson 2006).

## 2.2 | First- and Third-Order Perceptions

In addition to how best to measure status and prestige, we must also determine whose perceptions are to be measured. Police work is both service-oriented and public-facing, requiring officers to regularly make complex perceptual decisions during interactions. One particular issue, referred to as the third-order inference problem, is that officers must make decisions not solely based on what they think is best (first-order inference), or even what the specific person with whom they are interacting thinks is best (second-order inference), but also what they believe the public or "most people" (third-order inference) would consider best (Correll et al. 2017; Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Since authority rests on shared beliefs of legitimacy, officers must take into account what they believe others expect—independent of what they believe to be proper (Zelditch 2018). The importance of understanding what officers think the public thinks of them is rooted in Cooley's (1922) classic theory of self-concept development. In his "looking glass self," Cooley contends that individuals develop an understanding of who they are not only through their interactions with others but through reflected self-appraisals, perceptions of how they think others perceive and judge them. Additionally, they will perform efficacious actions based on these perceptions to maximize their self-esteem (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983).

Quantifying the difference between first- and third-order perceptions is important because the degree of consensus or mismatch between what officers believe the public thinks and what the public truly believes can affect officers' stress and motivation. Prominent theories of identity, (i.e., Affect Control Theory [ACT] and identity theory (Burke and Stets 2009, Heise 2007)) theorize that meaning consistency is central to behavior and emotions. If officers view themselves as powerful, esteemed figures, but the person they are interacting with behaves in ways that are inconsistent with those expectations, the mismatch creates stress, negative emotions, and induces them to perform especially powerful actions to address this mismatch (Cast and Burke 2002). Because police officers occupy very highly esteemed positions, they are likely to encounter situations that fail to meet such high expectations and thus are more likely to experience the resulting negative emotions compared to positions with lower status and expectations (Collett and Lizardo 2010; Stets 2004).

Status beliefs can also influence retention indirectly through decreased morale and motivation. While most studies have focused on officers' self-perceptions, the few studies that have examined officers' beliefs about the public view of their role found that job satisfaction is linked to the belief that the public perceives them positively (Fosam et al. 1998; Yim and Schafer 2009). Therefore, the belief that the public views them negatively can undermine officer motivation.

Referred to as the "Ferguson effect," some contend that negative media attention and increased public scrutiny of officer's actions have caused some officers to feel under siege and withdraw from proactive policing (MacDonald 2015). While research finds that this fear has not affected crime rates (Capellan et al. 2020; Pyrooz et al. 2016, Wolfe and Nix 2016), studies have found that the belief in a negative public image may have adverse effects on police motivation, recruitment, and retention (Deuchar et al. 2019; Morrow et al. 2019; Nix and Wolfe 2018). College students who believe that increased media coverage has adversely affected police work reported decreased motivation to apply for law enforcement positions (Morrow et al. 2019). Beliefs in a negative public image of law enforcement have been linked to lower officer morale and willingness to be proactive on the job (Deuchar et al. 2019; Nix and Wolfe 2018). In a Pew study of nearly 8000 police officers, Morin et al. (2017) found that high-profile media coverage has made nearly all (93%) feel more concerned for their safety. Furthermore, 86% reported that media coverage has made their job harder, and 72% have become less willing to stop and question people who seem suspicious. Rather than feeling respected and esteemed, some officers believe that public attitudes have eroded to the point of undermining the legitimacy of law enforcement (Nix and Pickett 2017), leading to higher turnover (Mourtgos et al. 2022).

## 3 | Methods

### 3.1 | Data

We used data from the Officer Safety and Wellness (OSAW) Initiative. Mumford et al. (2020) describe the study in detail. In brief, OSAW is a longitudinal, nationally representative sample of US public service officers whom researchers identified using a two-stage sample approach. Specifically, OSAW is a random stratified sample of officers within agencies. First, researchers selected a representative sample of LEAs from the 2017 National Database on Law Enforcement Agencies, including municipal, county, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and state police/highway patrol agencies. Participating LEAs' provided rosters of all full-time sworn officers, from which researchers randomly sampled officers stratified by agency size, oversampling women 2:1. The final wave one sample of 2867 LEOs (collected December 2017–May 2019) reflected 1135 agencies. We used data from wave two (collected January 2020–June 2021). All LEOs who completed the web-based wave one survey ($n = 2867$) were invited via email to participate in wave two, yielding 1528 (53.3%) completes, comprised of LEOs from 46 states (Table 1; see Mumford et al.

**TABLE 1** | Summary statistics of officer EPA measures (OSAW Wave 2, *n* = 1528).

| | Row (%) | SE |
|---|---|---|
| **Male** | 79.10 | 1.32 |
| **Age** (years, mean) | 43.78 | 0.34 |
| **Race/ethnicity** | | |
| White | 78.17 | 1.36 |
| Black | 7.35 | 0.88 |
| Hispanic | 9.72 | 0.91 |
| Multiracial/other | 4.76 | 0.71 |
| **Education** | | |
| High school | 6.08 | 0.86 |
| Some college | 22.77 | 1.48 |
| Associate's degree | 16.70 | 1.31 |
| Bachelor's degree | 40.22 | 1.73 |
| >College | 6.08 | 0.86 |
| **Officer rank** | | |
| Line officer | 59.58 | 1.74 |
| Supervisor | 19.67 | 1.39 |
| Commander | 20.65 | 1.48 |
| Other[a] | 0.10 | 0.10 |
| **Years as sworn officer** (mean) | 17.64 | 0.34 |
| **Location of work** | | |
| Urban | 40.34 | 1.72 |
| Suburban | 33.10 | 1.75 |
| Rural | 21.73 | 1.36 |
| Other | 4.83 | 0.73 |
| **Size class of agency** | | |
| Small | 35.20 | 1.79 |
| Medium | 9.00 | 1.10 |
| Large | 55.80 | 1.80 |
| **Agency segment** | | |
| Municipal | 81.07 | 1.13 |
| County | 8.57 | 0.84 |
| Bureau of Indian Affairs | 0.44 | 0.19 |
| State police | 9.91 | 0.76 |
| **Census region** | | |
| Northeast | 14.16 | 1.37 |
| Midwest | 25.18 | 1.45 |
| Southeast | 19.39 | 1.47 |
| South | 22.73 | 1.56 |
| West | 18.54 | 1.17 |

Abbreviation: SE: Standard error.

[a]"Other" includes only two LEOs who wrote in responses "retired detective" and "administrative assistant."

(2025) for a summary of an attrition analysis). The (blinded for review) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the OSAW protocols, and participating LEOs provided informed consent.

For information on actual public perceptions of law enforcement status and prestige as a comparison point to the OSAW estimates, we used data collected by Quinn et al. (2023) and provided publicly through the R package actdata (Combs 2022). These authors collected evaluation, potency, activity, and prestige ratings for 85 occupations. Using sliders via Qualtrics' XM survey platform, ratings were collected from a sample of 2726 respondents from an online Qualtrics panel matched to gender, age, race, ethnicity, and education percentages from the 2010 US Census. In our analyses, we used ratings of the term "police officer" measured between May 2019 and March 2020—nearly contemporaneously with the OSAW wave 2 data collection. For full methodological details on this data collection effort, see Quinn et al. (2023).
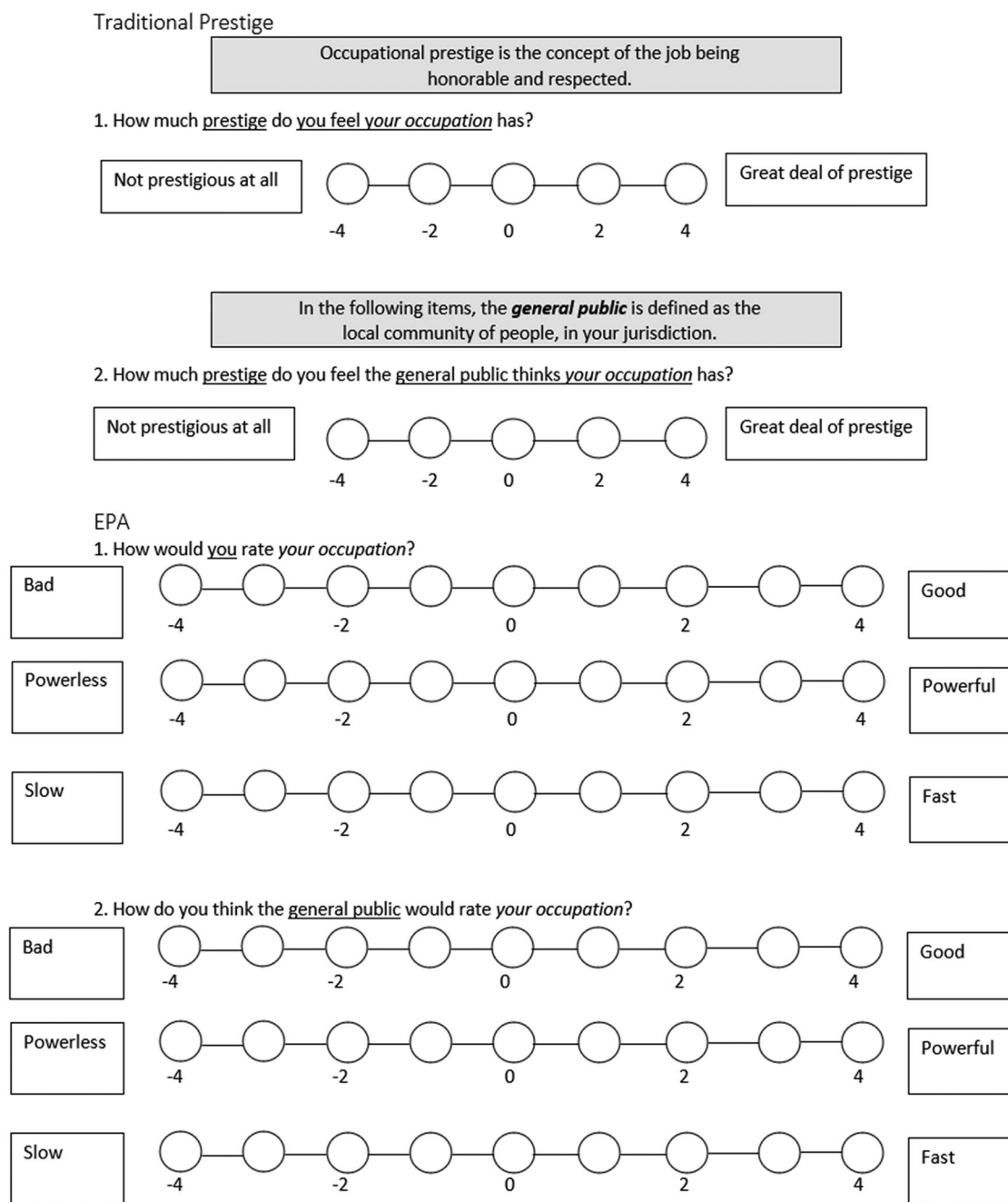
### 3.2 | Prestige Measures

In OSAW, two survey questions were used to measure first- and third-order perceptions for both traditional prestige and each of the three EPA dimensions. Following the methodology used by Freeland and Hoey (2018), traditional prestige was measured by asking LEOs: (1) How much prestige do you feel your occupation has? and (2) how much prestige do you feel the general public thinks your occupation has? Responses used a five-point scale ranging from *not prestigious at all* to *great deal of prestige* (Figure 1).

For multidimensional EPA, officers answered two sets of similar questions: (1) How would you rate your occupation? and (2) How do you think the general public would rate your occupation? For each question, officers were presented with the three EPA dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity on a nine-point scale with values ranging from *bad*, *powerless*, and *slow*, respectively, to *good*, *powerful*, and *fast*, respectively. We asked officers to think specifically about how the local community viewed the general public's views of the prestige of policing (third-order perceptions). Therefore, LEOs' responses to questions on third-order (external) prestige reflect their views on how the community that they interact with on a regular basis views their occupational prestige.

### 3.3 | Analysis

We restricted the analysis sample to LEOs with complete data on prestige measures (*n* = 1514). EPA ratings are typically scaled from −4 to 4 with zero being neutral (Heise, 2010). To facilitate comparison, the EPA ratings and traditional prestige responses were similarly scaled from −4 to 4 (values above the midpoint viewed as positive and values below viewed as negative). All analyses were weighted to reflect the probability of LEA and LEO selection and adjusted for survey non-response. We used Stata 15 (Stata Corp. 2017) for analysis and R Statistical Software (v4.1.3; R Core Team, 2022) for figure creation.

**FIGURE 1** | Traditional prestige and EPA measures. (For illustrative purposes, we present the numbers that we used in coding the outcome measures. However, LEOs who took the survey did not see the numbers in the prestige and EPA questions.)

## 4 | Results

Beginning with traditional prestige ratings, Figure 2 shows that officers' first order perceptions of occupational prestige (0.36) were more positive than their third-order perceptions of public views of their occupational prestige (−0.84). Turning to multidimensional EPA measures, officers provided an EPA profile rating of (2.55, 1.16, and 1.89) suggesting that they viewed police work as very good, powerful, and active, corresponding to the three EPA dimensions of evaluation (good/bad), potency (powerful/weak), and activity (fast/slow). In contrast, the EPA profile for how LEOs believed the public perceives policing was (−0.27, 2.39, and 1.22). The large discrepancy in evaluation ratings between LEO first-

and third- order perceptions suggests that officers believed the public views policing not as an esteemed occupation defined by high degrees of cultural goodness, but rather as slightly bad. The large discrepancy in potency ratings suggests that LEOs believed the public views their profession as much more powerful than they viewed it themselves.

The general US public's EPA profile for *police officer* in 2019 and early 2020 was 1.55, 2.33, and 1.94 (Quinn et al. 2023). Comparing these results to the profile officers believed the public held (−0.28, 2.40, and 1.22; as reported in OSAW wave 2 data) reveals that officers accurately predicted public perceptions of potency (power), but slightly underestimated public perceptions in the activity
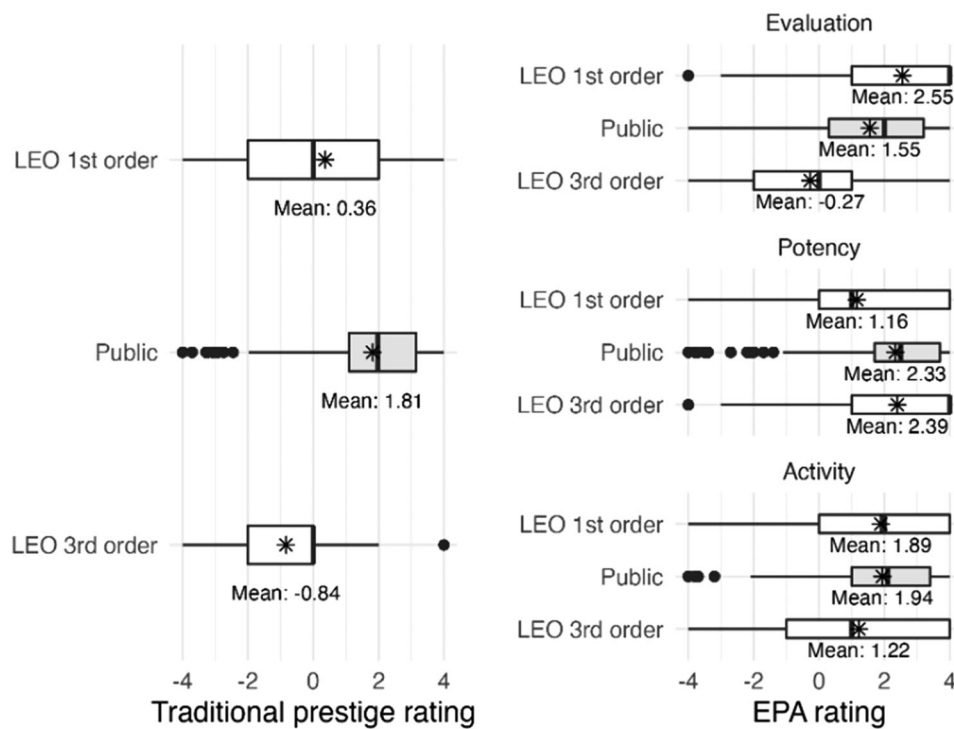
**FIGURE 2** | Perceptions of police officer occupational prestige and EPA. (Note 1: Unshaded boxes describe data collected as part of the OSAW initiative, described in full in Mumford et al. (2020). Weights are used in the calculation of these values. Shaded boxes describe data collected as part of a study on the cultural meaning of occupations by Quinn et al. (2023). Weights are not available for these data. Note 2: LEO first-order ratings are officers' perceptions of their own occupation. LEO third-order ratings are officers' estimations of how the general public would rate their occupation. Public ratings are those actually provided by a general population sample asked to rate "police officer" Quinn et al. (2023).)

dimension and substantially underestimated public perceptions in the evaluation dimension, which captures goodness and esteem. Contrary to viewing police officers negatively, the public views them positively (1.55) with a value lying between LEO first-order (what they believe) and third-order perceptions (what they think the public believes). This suggests that while officers understand that the public views them less positively than they view themselves, they are inaccurately amplifying this difference to the extent that they are turning positive perceptions negative.

To check whether officers from different agencies or in different sociodemographic groups rate prestige differently, we perform OLS regression of occupational prestige using officer sociodemographic and agency characteristics as independent variables (Tables S1 and S2). We find statistically significant variation by sex, race/ethnicity, rank, job location, agency segment, and Census region. However, the limited range of variance explained across models ($r^2$ from 0.03 to 0.08) suggests that, consistent with prior research, officers generally hold similar cultural perceptions of prestige.

## 4.1 | George Floyd and COVID-19 Effects

The OSAW wave 2 data collection occurred from January 2020 to June 2021. This time period included two events with the potential to change prestige ratings. The first was the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was declared a national emergency on March 13, 2020, and states issued their first stay-at-home orders

between then and April 7, 2020. Quinn et al. (2024) found that, on average, EPA ratings of 85 selected occupations decreased immediately following the COVID-19 outbreak, meaning there was an across-the-board decrease in the social standing of many different occupations. The second notable event was the well-publicized murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a White police officer on May 25, 2020. Floyd's death was followed by extensive public protests against racism and police violence (Intelligence Commanders Group: Major Cities Chiefs Association 2020). Heightened media attention and exposure to anti-law enforcement sentiments may have affected LEO survey responses, especially questions about how they believed the community perceives them.

The majority of officers completed the OSAW survey before the start of the pandemic (67.8%) and before George Floyd's murder (78.1%). Cultural sentiments are usually quite stable and can rebound even after large exogenous shocks (Quinn et al. 2024), making studying these pre-shock sentiments still valuable. We tested for the robustness of our findings in the face of these events by first testing whether prestige and EPA measures (both first- and third-order perceptions) differed between LEOs who completed the survey prior to May 25, 2020, and those who completed it after May 25. We found that those who completed the survey after May 25 perceived their occupation as less prestigious ($b = -0.64$, 95% confidence interval [CI] $-1.09$ to $-0.18$), $p < 0.01$) than those who completed the survey before May 25 (Table 2). Self-perceptions did not significantly differ. However, LEOs who completed the survey after May 25 tended to believe the public's

**TABLE 2** | Prestige and EPA ratings after the murder of George Floyd.

| Panel A: First order: You would rate your occupation as… | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **(1)** | **(2)** | **(3)** | **(4)** |
| | **Prestigious** | **Good** | **Powerful** | **Fast** |
| After George Floyd's murder | −0.64*** | −0.01 | −0.13 | 0.17 |
| | (−1.09 to −0.18) | (−0.37–0.35) | (−0.55–0.28) | (−0.16–0.49) |
| Constant | 0.49*** | 2.55*** | 1.18*** | 1.85*** |
| | (0.31–0.67) | (2.40–2.71) | (1.01–1.36) | (1.71–2.00) |
| Observations | 1528 | 1528 | 1,528 | 1528 |
| R-squared | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

| Panel B: Third order: You think the public would rate your occupation as… | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **(1)** | **(2)** | **(3)** | **(4)** |
| | **Prestigious** | **Good** | **Powerful** | **Fast** |
| After George Floyd's murder | −0.56*** | −0.48** | −0.16 | −0.18 |
| | (−0.95 to −0.17) | (−0.89 to −0.07) | (−0.56–0.24) | (−0.65–0.28) |
| Constant | −0.73*** | −0.18* | 2.43*** | 1.25*** |
| | (−0.90 to −0.55) | (−0.37–0.02) | (2.25–2.60) | (1.04–1.47) |
| Observations | 1528 | 1528 | 1528 | 1528 |
| R-squared | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

*Note:* 95% CI in parentheses.

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

perceptions of their occupation's prestige ($b = -0.56$, 95% CI: −0.95 to −0.17, $p < 0.01$) and evaluation ($b = -0.48$, 95% CI: −0.89 to −0.07, $p < 0.05$) was significantly lower when compared to LEOs who completed the survey prior to May 25. Power and activity assessments were not significantly different. We also assessed whether traditional prestige and EPA measures differed significantly between LEOs who completed the survey before COVID-19 was declared a national emergency and those who completed it after South Carolina issued the last stay-at-home order on April 7. Those who completed the survey after the stay-at-home orders were in place nationwide viewed policing as less prestigious ($b = -0.48$, 95% CI: −0.90 to −0.06) than those who completed the survey before COVID-19 was declared a national emergency (Table 3). Neither first-order EPA measures nor any third-order measures were significantly different.

These results imply stable or increased gaps between LEO first and third order evaluation, potency, and activity perceptions, and a stable or slightly decreased gap between first and third order traditional prestige perceptions. Quinn et al. (2024) find that public perceptions of police officers decreased by nearly one point in evaluation after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd, implying a larger gap between police first-order and public perceptions and a smaller gap between public perceptions and police third-order perceptions. Police third-order perceptions were still overly pessimistic in comparison to public perceptions. Like us, they find no potency or activity changes.

To verify the robustness of our findings regarding cultural consensus, we repeated our analysis of differences in prestige ratings by sociodemographic and occupational characteristics while excluding LEOs who completed the survey after COVID-19 was declared a national emergency (thereby also excluding those who completed the survey after the death of George Floyd). Results were qualitatively similar to our findings with the whole sample (Tables S3 and S4).

## 5 | Discussion

Few previous studies have investigated how police officers view their occupational prestige or how they believe the public views it. We find that LEOs believe the public views their occupation as less prestigious, less good, and less active than they themselves see it, which is consistent with Yim and Schafer (2009) study of a midwestern metropolitan police department. Importantly, we found that these perceived external perspectives are not only lower relative to LEOs' average internal perspectives, but traditional prestige and evaluation ("goodness") are negative, indicating that LEOs tend to believe the public views their occupation with animosity. Prior research indicates that negative perceived external perspectives are associated with lower job satisfaction (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Kamasak 2011; Yim and Schafer 2009), lower commitment to their organization (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Dutton et al. 1994), and higher turnover intentions (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Kamasak 2011). Therefore, believing the community views policing negatively is far from harmless and may be one factor contributing to the growing number of resignations among officers in recent years.

**TABLE 3** | Prestige and EPA ratings after start of COVID-19 pandemic.

**Panel A: First order: You would rate your occupation as…**

| | (1) Prestigious | (2) Good | (3) Powerful | (4) Fast |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| After start of COVID-19 | −0.48** | 0.11 | 0.07 | 0.25 |
| | (−0.90 to −0.06) | (−0.22–0.44) | (−0.32–0.45) | (−0.06–0.55) |
| Constant | 0.47*** | 2.51*** | 1.12*** | 1.80*** |
| | (0.28–0.67) | (2.34–2.68) | (0.93–1.31) | (1.64–1.96) |
| Observations | 1442 | 1442 | 1442 | 1442 |
| R-squared | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

**Panel B: Third order: You think the public would rate your occupation as…**

| | (1) Prestigious | (2) Good | (3) Powerful | (4) Fast |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| After start of COVID-19 | −0.31 | −0.33* | −0.05 | −0.21 |
| | (-0.69 - 0.07) | (-0.72 - 0.06) | (-0.42 - 0.32) | (−0.66–0.24) |
| Constant | −0.81*** | −0.23** | 2.40*** | 1.28*** |
| | (−0.99 to −0.63) | (−0.44 to −0.02) | (2.21–2.59) | (1.05–1.51) |
| Observations | 1442 | 1442 | 1442 | 1442 |
| R-squared | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |

*Note:* 95% CI in parentheses.

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

Our study illustrates the value a multidimensional, affective approach to prestige measurement. The EPA values illustrate patterns—such as differences in perceptions of goodness between officers and the public—that cannot be so specifically identified using traditional unidimensional prestige measures (Clinkinbeard et al. 2021).

## 5.1 | Limitations

This study has five primary limitations. First, the OSAW wave 2 data collection spans both the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd. Even so, the majority of the data collection occurred prior to these events, and sensitivity analyses suggest that our main findings are not driven by these events. Next, our models explain between 3% and 8% of the variation in traditional and multidimensional prestige, leaving much variation unexplained. Third, while we included several variables to control for location and agency characteristics, we were unable to present more detailed data to avoid deductive disclosure of identity. Fourth, the officer response rate, reflecting differences between officers who did and did not choose to participate in the study, may have introduced bias. Fifth, the survey relied on self-reported data, which are prone to social desirability bias. Nonetheless, we used methods to mitigate this possibility, such as using online surveys that maintained the confidentiality not only of the officers' response data but also kept confidential from agency administrators any indication of which officers participated in the study.

## 5.2 | Implications

We find that LEOs in our nationally representative sample of officers tend to believe that the community views their occupation negatively on the traditional prestige and evaluation ("goodness") measures. Although officers are correct about the direction of public views relative to their own, they overestimate the true magnitude of the difference. It is possible that correcting LEO's misperceptions of public views may decrease stress and increase retention. Negative perceived external perspectives are linked to lower commitment to employing organizations (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Dutton et al. 1994), lower job satisfaction (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Kamasak 2011; Yim and Schafer 2009), and higher turnover intentions (Carmeli and Freund 2009; Kamasak 2011). We recommend future work explore whether campaigns to improve how officers think of the community's perceptions of their occupation—and by extension, the officers themselves—promote these facets of officer well-being and agency commitment.

Furthermore, decreasing the discrepancy between officers' perception of public views and actual public views may make it easier for them to verify their identities. This would be expected to not only decrease stress but also decrease the need for forceful action to reassert identity (Cast and Burke 2002). Such identity-asserting action may partially explain why officers sometimes use more force than called for by a suspect's level of resistance (Tillyer 2022). Reducing its incidence may produce more positive interactions with the public and more positive emotional responses in both officers and members of the public.

Finally, we found that prestige ratings changed after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd. We cannot establish a causal link between these events and observed ratings changes, nor disentangle the possible effects of COVID from the possible effects of public protest against police misconduct following George Floyd's death. However, our results suggest it is possible that public criticism and media portrayals of policing influence self-assessments of prestige and perceptions of the views of the community. US media uses negative framings of events significantly more than neutral or positive framings (Leetaru 2019; Sacerdote et al. 2020). LEOs have expressed concern that overtly negative public sentiment and media portrayal of police may push morally dependable officers out of the profession (Mumford et al. 2022). Tracking multidimensional measurement of public perceptions and educating LEOs about how to interpret public perceptions in the context of their own behavior—a blending of research and programmatic next steps—could be helpful to the related goals of maintaining the professional workforce as well as public safety.

## 6 | Conclusion

Using a nationally representative sample of US police officers, we found that officers tended to rate their occupation positively, whether on the traditional prestige measure or on the multidimensional EPA measures. However, on the dimensions of evaluation and activity (but not potency), officers believed the public views policing less highly than the officers themselves do. Actual public perceptions for law enforcement officers' prestige measures lie in between officers' first-order perceptions and their third-order perceptions. Our findings suggest that presenting officers with information about the public's true views could help by diminishing the difference between first-order views and third-order views of the prestige of law enforcement as an occupation. Finally, our results support the use of the multidimensional EPA measures to better capture the various components of prestige in combination with, or instead of, the traditional prestige measure, especially in occupations such as law enforcement, in which honor and respect are major components.

**Data Availability Statement**

Data for OSAW wave 1 are available at ICPSR: https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/studies/37821. Wave 2 data are available at ICPSR: https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/studies/39030.

## References

Stata Corp. 2017. *Stata Statistical Software: Release 15*. StataCorp LP.

Ashforth, B. E., and G. E. Kreiner. 1999. ""How Can You Do It?": Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity." *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3: 413–434.

Bright, L. 2021. "Why Does PSM Lead to Higher Work Stress? Exploring the Role That Organizational Identity Theory Has on the Relationship Between Public Service Motivation and External-Related Stress Among Federal Government Employees." *Public Organization Review* 22: 803–820.

Brown, B., and W. R. Benedict. 2002. "Perceptions of the Police: Past Findings, Methodological Issues, Conceptual Issues and Policy Implications." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 25, no. 3: 543–580.

Bukodi, E., S. Dex, and J. H. Goldthorpe. 2011. "The Conceptualisation and Measurement of Occupational Hierarchies: A Review, a Proposal and Some Illustrative Analyses." *Quality & Quantity* 45, no. 3: 623–639.

Burke, P. J., and J. E. Stets. 2009. *Identity Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Buzawa, E. S. 1984. "Determining Patrol Officer Job Satisfaction." *Criminology* 22, no. 1: 61–81.

Cao, L., S. Stack, and Y. Sun. 1998. "Public Attitudes Toward the Police: A Comparative Study Between Japan and America." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 26, no. 4: 279–289.

Capellan, J. A., R. Lautenschlager, and J. R. Silva. 2020. "Deconstructing the Ferguson Effect: A Multilevel Mediation Analysis of Public Scrutiny, De-Policing, and Crime." *Journal of Crime and Justice* 43, no. 2: 125–144.

Carmeli, A., and A. Freund. 2009. "Linking Perceived External Prestige and Intentions to Leave the Organization: The Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction and Affective Commitment." *Journal of Social Service Research* 35, no. 3: 236–250.

Cast, A. D., and P. J. Burke. 2002. "A Theory of Self-Esteem." *Social Forces* 80, no. 3: 1041–1068.

Clinkinbeard, S. S., S. J. Solomon, and R. M. Rief. 2021. "Why Did You Become a Police Officer? Entry-Related Motives and Concerns of Women and Men in Policing." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 48, no. 6: 715–733.

Collett, J. L., and O. Lizardo. 2010. "Occupational Status and the Experience of Anger." *Social Forces* 88, no. 5: 2079–2104.

Combs, A. 2022. *Actdata: A Transparent Repository for Standardized Public Affect Control Theory Data Sets, Version 0.0.0.9003. 2022*. GitHub. https://github.com/ahcombs/actdata.

Cooley, C. H. 1922. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Correll, S. J., C. L. Ridgeway, E. W. Zuckerman, S. Jank, S. Jordan-Bloch, and S. Nakagawa. 2017. "It's the Conventional Thought That Counts: How Third-Order Inference Produces Status Advantage." *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 2: 297–327.

Davis, O. 2021. "Employment and Retirement Among Older Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic." Working Paper Series. 2021-06. Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis and Department of Economics, The New School for Social Research.

Deuchar, R., S. W. Fallik, and V. J. Crichlow. 2019. "Despondent Officer Narratives and the 'Post-Ferguson' Effect: Exploring Law Enforcement Perspectives and Strategies in a Southern American State." *Policing and Society* 29, no. 9: 1042–1057.

Dutton, J. E., J. M. Dukerich, and C. V. Harquail. 1994. "Organizational Images and Member Identification." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39: 239–263.

Featherman, D. L., and R. M. Hauser. 1976. "Prestige or Socioeconomic Scales in the Study of Occupational Achievement?" *Sociological Methods & Research* 4, no. 4: 403–422.

Fosam, E. B., M. F. J. Grimsley, and S. J. Wisher. 1998. "Exploring Models for Employee Satisfaction With Particular Reference to a Police Force." *Total Quality Management* 9, no. 2–3: 235–247.

Freeland, R. E., and J. Hooey. 2018. "The Structure of Deference: Modeling Occupational Status Using Affect Control Theory." *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 2: 243–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418761857.

Freeland, R. E., and C. E. Harnois. 2020. "Bridging the Gender Wage Gap: Gendered Cultural Sentiments, Sex Segregation, and Occupation-Level Wages." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 83, no. 2: 129–151.

Gecas, V., and M. L. Schwalbe. 1983. "Beyond the Looking-Glass Self: Social Structure and Efficacy-Based Self-Esteem." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 46, no. 2: 77–88. https://doi.org/10.2307/3033844.

Goldthorpe, J. H., and K. Hope. 1972. "Occupational Grading and Occupational Prestige." *Social Science Information* 11, no. 5: 17–73.

Hauser, R. M., and J. R. Warren. 1997. "Socioeconomic Indexes for Occupations: A Review, Update, and Critique." *Sociological Methodology* 27, no. 1: 177–298.

Heise, D. R. 2007. *Expressive Order: Confirming Sentiments in Social Actions*. Springer Science & Business Media.

Heise, D. R. 2010. *Surveying Cultures: Discovering Shared Conceptions and Sentiments*. John Wiley & Sons.

Hope, K. 1982. "A Liberal Theory of Prestige." *American Journal of Sociology* 87, no. 5: 1011–1031.

Hyland, S. 2018. *Full-Time Employees in Law Enforcement Agencies, 1997–2016*. US Department of Justice.

Intelligence Commanders Group: Major Cities Chiefs Association. 2020. "Report on the 2020 Protests and Civil Unrest." Retrieved September 30, 2022. https://majorcitieschiefs.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MCCA-Report-on-the-2020-Protest-and-Civil-Unrest.pdf.

Kamasak, R. 2011. "The Influence of Perceived External Prestige on Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intentions." *Journal of Business and Economics* 2, no. 3: 209–221.

Kraus, M. W., J. J. X. Tan, and M. B. Tannenbaum. 2013. "The Social Ladder: A Rank-Based Perspective on Social Class." *Psychological Inquiry* 24, no. 2: 81–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2013.778803.

Langford, T., and N. J. MacKinnon. 2000. "The Affective Bases for the Gendering of Traits: Comparing the United States and Canada." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 1: 34–48.

Leetaru, K. 2019. "Sentiment Mining 500 Years of History: is the World Really Darkening?" *Forbes*, May 14.

Lim, V. K. G., T. S. H. Teo, and S. K. B. See. 2000. "Perceived Job Image Among Police Officers in Singapore: Factorial Dimensions and Differential Effects." *Journal of Social Psychology* 140, no. 6: 740–750.

MacDonald, H. 2015. "The New Nationwide Crime Wave." *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved November 16, 2022. https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-nationwide-crime-wave-1432938425.

Maloney, E. 2020. "The Social Psychology of Occupational Status Groups: Relationality in the Structure of Deference." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 83, no. 4: 463–475.

Moore, C. D., and D. T. Robinson. 2006. "Selective Identity Preferences: Choosing From Among Alternative Occupational Identities." *Advances in Group Processes*, 23: 253–281.

Morin, R., K. Parker, R. Stepler, and A. Mercer. 2017. "Behind the Badge: Amid Protests and Calls for Reform, How Police View Their Jobs, Key Issues and Recent Fatal Encounters Between Blacks and Police." *Pew Research Center*, January 11.

Morrow, W. J., S. G. Vickovic, L. M. Dario, and J. A. Shjarback. 2019. "Examining a Ferguson Effect on College Students' Motivation to Become Police Officers." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 30, no. 4: 585–605.

Mourtgos, S. M., I. T. Adams, and J. Nix. 2022. "Elevated Police Turnover Following the Summer of George Floyd Protests: A Synthetic Control Study." *Criminology & Public Policy* 21, no. 1: 9–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12556.

Mumford, E. A., B. G. Taylor, W. Liu, J. Barnum, and S. Goddison. 2020. "Law Enforcement Officers Safety and Wellness: A Multi-Level Study." https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/255998.pdf.

Mumford, E. A., K. A. Hudak, M. M. Liotta, and M. S. O'Leary. 2022. "Occupational Prestige and Job Satisfaction in High-Stress Public Safety Work." *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 17: paac049.

Mumford, E. A., W. Liu, and M. S. O'Leary. 2025. "U.S. Law Enforcement Officers' Stress, Job Satisfaction, Job Performance, and Resilience: A National Sample." *Police Quarterly* 28, no. 1: 104–126.

Nakao, K., and J. Treas. 1994. "Updating Occupational Prestige and Socioeconomic Scores: How the New Measures Measure Up." *Sociological Methodology* 24: 1–72.

Nix, J., and J. T. Pickett. 2017. "Third-Person Perceptions, Hostile Media Effects, and Policing: Developing a Theoretical Framework for Assessing the Ferguson Effect." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 51: 24–33.

Nix, J., and S. E. Wolfe. 2018. "Management-Level Officers' Experiences With the Ferguson Effect." *Policing: An International Journal* 41, no. 2: 262–275.

Osgood, C. E., W. H. May, M. S. Miron, and M. S. Miron. 1975. *Cross-Cultural Universals of Affective Meaning*. University of Illinois Press.

Osgood, C. E., and O. Tzeng. 1990. *Language, Meaning, and Culture: The Selected Papers of C. E Osgood*. Praeger Publishers.

Police Executive Research Forum. 2019. "The Workforce Crisis, and What Police Agencies are Doing About it." Published September 2019. https://www.policeforum.org/assets/WorkforceCrisis.pdf.

Pyrooz, D. C., S. H. Decker, S. E. Wolfe, and J. A. Shjarback. 2016. "Was There a Ferguson Effect on Crime Rates in Large Us Cities?" *Journal of Criminal Justice* 46: 1–8.

Quinn, J. M., R. E. Freeland, K. B. Rogers, J. Hoey, and L. Smith-Lovin. 2023. "How Cultural Meanings of Occupations in the US Changed During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 1: 125–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211066041.

Quinn, J. M., R. E. Freeland, K. B. Rogers, J. Hoey, and L. Smith-Lovin. 2024. "Meaning Change in U.S. Occupational Identities During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Was It Temporary or Durable?" *American Behavioral Scientist* 87, no. 4: 513–524. https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725241228529.

Raganella, A. J., and M. D. White. 2004. "Race, Gender, and Motivation for Becoming a Police Officer: Implications for Building a Representative Police Department." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 32, no. 6: 501–513.

Ridgeway, C. L., and S. J. Correll. 2006. "Consensus and the Creation of Status Beliefs." *Social Forces* 85, no. 1: 431–453.

Sacerdote, B., R. Sehgal, and M. Cook. 2020. "Why is all Covid-19 News Bad News?" Working Paper No. 28110. National Bureau of Economic Research, November.

Smith, T. W., and J. Son. 2014. *Measuring Occupational Prestige on the 2012 General Social Survey*. NORC at the University of Chicago.

Stets, J. E. 2004. "Emotions in Identity Theory: The Effect of Status." in *Theory and Research on Human Emotions*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Tillyer, R. 2022. "Unpacking Sequential Actions Within Use of Force Incidents." *Police Quarterly* 25, no. 2: 178–200.

Treiman, D. J. 1977. *Occupational Prestige in Comparative Perspective*. Elsevier.

Weber, M. 1946. "From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology." Edited and Translated by H. Gerth and C. Mills. Oxford University Press.

Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press.

White, M. D., J. A. Cooper, J. Saunders, and A. J. Raganella. 2010. "Motivations for Becoming a Police Officer: Re-Assessing Officer Attitudes and Job Satisfaction After Six Years on the Street." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 4: 520–530.

Wolfe, S. E., and J. Nix. 2016. "The Alleged "Ferguson Effect" and Police Willingness to Engage in Community Partnership." *Law and Human Behavior* 40, no. 1: 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000164.

Yim, Y., and B. D. Schafer. 2009. "Police and Their Perceived Image: How Community Influence Officers' Job Satisfaction." *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 10, no. 1: 17–29.

Zelditch, M. 2018. "Legitimacy Theory." In *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, 324. Stanford University Press.

**Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting File 1: ssqu70062-sup-0001-SuppMat.docx