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The Social History of
Crime and Punishment
in America
AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

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Television, Police in

Police officers have maintained a high-profile presence on television since the earliest days of commercial network broadcasting in the 1940s and 1950s. From police procedurals such as *Dragnet* and *Adam-12* to early 21st century crime dramas such as *The Shield* and *The Wire*, police programs have proven to be among the most durable and popular of all television genres. In their hundreds of iterations, cop shows have sought to depict law enforcement in a “realistic” manner, striving to capture the “true” nature of police work with gritty authenticity. At the same time, cop shows have also tended to emphasize the most visually sensational aspects of police work—gunplay, car chases, physical action, and the like—in order to satisfy the desire of a mass audience to experience the illicit thrills of crime and violence while remaining safely within the parameters of the law.

The long-standing popularity of television cop shows has enabled them to play a pivotal role in shaping the American public’s perceptions of the police. Approaching the social problem of crime from the point of view of law enforcement, cop shows have traditionally valorized police officers as heroic guardians of the public welfare, tasked with protecting ordinary citizens from criminals. Television has also familiarized audiences with

the minutiae of police work, from the proper technique for handcuffing suspects to the exact language of the Miranda warning (“You have the right to remain silent ...”), a staple on nearly all cop shows.

In their more mature incarnations, however, police dramas have explored the most urgent complications attending the role of law enforcement in a democratic society. Cop shows have trained a critical gaze on police authority by depicting corruption and the limits and abuses of police power, as well the substantial personal and emotional costs of working in law enforcement for the officers themselves. As agents of the state, cops have the ability to arrest citizens and compel them to obey commands (“pull over!” “freeze!”), but they are also public servants required to uphold the law as it exists. Police shows frequently figure this relationship as a tension between the institutional constraints of the “system” and the cops’ own personal pursuit of justice, presenting police officers as rule-breaking individualists whose own private moral code potentially supersedes their devotion to the law or their tolerance for the bureaucracy of the justice process. In many cases, this intolerance is presented as a justified form of anger against a system hamstrung by regulations that favor criminals over victims.

The American cop show’s emphasis on out-law individualism has, paradoxically, tended to reinforce the conservative political bent of police programs; because cop shows have traditionally seen crime as a problem of law enforcement rather than of social justice, they devote more attention to the contact point between cops and criminals rather than to the underlying social conditions that help to produce crime in the first place. Cop shows have also exhibited evolving social attitudes on race, gender, and authority. Traditionally white and male, police officers on television have diversified significantly over the years, as evidenced by the multiracial ensemble casts of countless TV cop dramas. Because police officers, due in part to television’s influence, hold such a prominent position in the American cultural imaginary, the question of who gets to carry a badge and a gun on TV is also, in some sense, the question of who gets to be considered an “American.” Thanks to their pervasive presence in U.S. popular culture, television cop

shows offer a revealing window into the way that America understands itself and its complex relationship to authority, crime, and justice.

Early Cop Shows

While short-lived crime dramas such as *Stand By for Crime* (1949), *Photocrime* (1949), and *Chicagoland Mystery Players* (1949–50) technically count as television’s first cop shows, the most seminal police program of the medium’s early years was *Dragnet* (1952–59; 1967–70). Created and produced by actor Jack Webb, who starred as Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Sergeant Joe Friday and directed several of the show’s episodes, *Dragnet* defined the conventions of the police “procedural” by envisioning police work as a set of routines carried out by detectives committed to preserving establishment values and serving the public good. A typical *Dragnet* episode, shot in semidocumentary style and narrated by Webb in a terse monotone, followed Friday and his partner through the city of Los Angeles as they interrogated suspects and witnesses, pursued leads, and foiled crimes, all within the show’s tightly constructed half-hour format. In contrast to earlier radio police serials that tended to emphasize shoot-outs and melodrama, *Dragnet* focused on the details of crime-solving with little action or gunplay; one of Webb’s “rules” for the show was that no more than one bullet could be fired every four weeks. “Just the facts, ma’am,” Friday’s familiar admonition to witnesses, was also an unofficial mantra for the show’s no-frills depiction of law enforcement.

Unlike many subsequent cop shows, *Dragnet* also displayed an unshakable faith in the efficacy of the justice system; each episode concluded with a summary of the arrested criminal’s successful prosecution and incarceration. The show’s positive portrayal of police professionalism made it a virtual promotional vehicle for the real-life LAPD in the Eisenhower era. Not only did *Dragnet* draw many of its story lines from actual LAPD case files, but it also represented the police as moral, rational agents of the law. Webb followed his *Dragnet* success by creating another long-running police procedural, *Adam-12* (1968–75), this time centering on two uniformed patrol officers who cruised the streets of Los Angeles in a black-and-white squad car.



Jack Webb (left) and Harry Morgan from the popular 1950s television program *Dragnet*. Webb created and produced the show and starred as no-nonsense Sergeant Joe Friday.

Though *Dragnet* established an early benchmark for “realism” in televisual depictions of the police, its staid tone and establishment values put it at odds with the social and political transformations taking place in American society in the late 1960s. As U.S. television audiences became increasingly exposed to images of real-life police officers turning dogs and fire hoses on black civil rights demonstrators, predominantly white police forces repressing distressed black communities in northern inner cities, and even America’s vexed role as “global policeman” during the cold war and Vietnam, the received notion that the police automatically stood for peace and justice began to seem outmoded and simplistic. In part as a result of these changes, cop shows in the late 1960s and early 1970s began to move away from *Dragnet*’s emphasis on unquestioned white male authority and to absorb, if not wholly endorse, the energies and ideologies of the counterculture.

These changes became apparent in such disparate cop shows as *The Mod Squad* (1968–73), which centered on three former juvenile delinquents—“one black, one white, one blonde”—who worked undercover to fight crime in the southern California “beat scene”; *Ironside* (1967–75), which starred Raymond Burr as a wheelchair-bound ex-San Francisco police detective who combated crime outside the conventional channels of the police department with the help of male and female deputies and an African American bodyguard; and *Hawaii Five-O* (1968–80), a long-running procedural starring Jack Lord as Steve McGarrett, a liberal-minded detective whose Hawai’i state police unit includes both a trusted white deputy and Asian and Polynesian officers. The show’s exploitation of Hawai’i’s colorful tropical locations, like *The Mod Squad*’s appropriation of the youth culture or *Ironside*’s inclusion of women and people of color on the side of law enforcement, demonstrated how television police shows attempted to leaven traditional police authority with nontraditional elements.

The 1970s

These strategies became increasingly standardized as the cop show genre proliferated in the 1970s, a decade in which over 40 police-themed series hit the airwaves. The sheer abundance of cop shows on TV during this era suggested public ambivalence toward law enforcement. On the one hand, the cop show’s ubiquity signaled a reassertion of law and order after the anarchic decade of the 1960s; on the other hand, television cops of the 1970s, though overwhelmingly white and male, tended to be streetwise, ethnically specific individualists who adhered as much to their own personal codes as to the exigencies of law enforcement. Representative examples included *Columbo* (1971–77), which starred Peter Falk as a trench coat-clad LAPD detective whose pose as a polite bumbler masked his skill at solving murders; *Kojak* (1973–78), which featured Greek American actor Telly Savalas as a tough, bald, lollipop-sucking New York police lieutenant whose hardscrabble upbringing gave him special knowledge of the streets; and *Baretta* (1975–78), starring Robert Blake as an Italian American undercover cop who lived in a dilapidated hotel and used his mastery of disguise to infiltrate various criminal organizations.

Perhaps the decade's signature cop show was *Starsky & Hutch* (1975–79), which blended an apparent glorification of police brutality with a tongue-in-cheek emphasis on the homoerotic male bonding between its two odd-couple detective-buddies, Dave Starsky (Paul Michael Glaser) and Ken “Hutch” Hutchinson (David Soul). Taking its cue from movie cops like Dirty Harry and Popeye Doyle, *Starsky & Hutch* depicted its two heroes routinely intimidating, browbeating, and assaulting an array of suspects, often chasing them down in Starsky's tomato-red Gran Torino. The cops' streetwise credibility also hinged on their bond with their loyal black informant, Huggy Bear (Antonio Fargas).

The 1980s

The cop show's tendency toward either cartoonish action or rigid proceduralism made the genre ripe for reinvention by the early 1980s. While *Police Story* (1973–77), an anthology series created by crime novelist and former LAPD officer Joseph Wambaugh, had sought to bring renewed realism to the police drama, the series that best exploited this opportunity was the critically acclaimed *Hill Street Blues* (1981–87). Cocreated by Steven Bochco, *Hill Street Blues* sought to reinvigorate the police drama by taking a humanist, documentary-like approach that balanced procedural elements with a nuanced exploration of the cops' private lives and personal travails. Set in a chaotic police precinct in a crime-ridden section of an unnamed eastern city that seemed to symbolize the decline of America's inner cities during the Reagan era, the show's “tele-vérité” style involved the kind of overlapping dialogue and distracted camerawork characteristic of a Robert Altman film. Moreover, its writers deliberately avoided the cop-show tradition of wrapping up cases neatly at the end of each hour, instead stretching them out across multiple episodes or even leaving them unsolved altogether.

At the heart of the series was the intense but stoic Captain Frank Furillo (Daniel J. Travanti), a recovering alcoholic whose supervision of the dilapidated Hill Street station required him to deal with overworked cops, dangerous criminals, and a tangled city bureaucracy while also coping with a combative ex-wife and carrying on a secret romance with liberal public defender Joyce

Davenport (Veronica Hamel). Picturing the police precinct as a quotidian American workplace, each episode began with an early-morning “roll call” in which Sergeant Phil Esterhaus (Michael Conrad) briefed a roomful of weary cops on the day's important cases. Esterhaus's memorable catchphrase, “Let's be careful out there,” captured the show's empathy for police officers who, though neither invulnerable action heroes nor robotic civil servants, found themselves on the front-lines of urban chaos. *Hill Street Blues* was also notable for its effort to challenge at least some of the conservative assumptions of the traditional cop show. In addition to its matter-of-fact depiction of a diverse police force that included women and people of color, the show addressed issues of police corruption and tensions between the police and ghettoized minorities.

If *Hill Street Blues* redefined the cop show's commitment to “realism” in a way that would prove hugely influential on later police dramas such as *Law & Order* and *NYPD Blue*, another 1980s cop show, *Miami Vice* (1984–89), sought to move beyond realism altogether by wedding the police drama to the visual and aural innovations of the then-new Music Television (MTV). Executive produced by feature film director Michael Mann and starring Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas as undercover vice detectives Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs, the show reportedly had its genesis as “MTV cops,” two words scrawled on the notepad of an NBC entertainment executive.

In addition to a contemporary rock soundtrack, rapid-fire editing, and stylized camera angles that made the cop show akin to a music video, the series also exploited the seedy tropical glamour of Miami in a way that recalled but far surpassed *Hawaii Five-O's* use of Hawai'i. Crucially, Crockett and Tubbs were “hip” cops, clad in expensive designer clothing and driving flashy cars designed to maximize their undercover image as drug dealers. That the show's two leads were also interracial male buddies—a staple of countless cop shows from *CHiPs* to *Hill Street Blues* to *The Wire*—made the implicit argument that differences in race, background, and culture could be elided through a shared commitment to police work—and, of course, a shared aura of “cool.”

Though the show tended to glamorize the various forms of “vice”—drug use, arms dealing, and

prostitution—suggested by its title, it also examined the personal cost of prolonged undercover work; in one story line, Crockett sustained a head injury that made him believe that he was his criminal alter-ego. *Miami Vice* was equally notable for its critical, even despairing, attitude toward the Reagan-era “war on drugs,” an outlook that later shows, such as *The Wire*, would echo. Numerous episodes ended with Crockett and Tubbs finding their own quest for local justice hamstrung by federal agencies (such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] or Drug Enforcement Agency) whose skewed priorities exposed politically motivated U.S. complicity in drug trafficking in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

While *Hill Street Blues* and *Miami Vice* featured female police officers in their ensemble casts, neither show challenged the cop show’s essentially masculine point of view. *Cagney and Lacey* (1982–88) was groundbreaking for doing just that; in its depiction of two female New York City police detectives, recovering alcoholic Christine Cagney (Sharon Gless) and married mother of three Mary Beth Lacey (Tyne Daly), the show represented a serious effort to examine the complexities of law enforcement from a female, even feminist, point of view. While women had occupied starring roles in cop shows before—notably Angie Dickinson in *Police Woman* (1974–78) and Teresa Graves in *Get Christie Love!* (1974–75)—those programs tended to treat the female star primarily as a sex object. In contrast, *Cagney & Lacey* presented its female cops as tough, compassionate, and highly competent, and the show melded traditional procedural plots with story lines involving date rape, abortion, domestic abuse, and the workplace sexism of the police precinct.

The show itself was forced to contend with the conservative gender politics of the TV industry. Though actress Meg Foster played Cagney in early episodes, she was replaced by Gless, a “softer” presence on screen, after TV executives noted “lesbian overtones” between Foster and Daly. In pushing past these hurdles and showing women who succeeded in a traditionally male line of work, the series laid important groundwork for later cop shows that featured women in ensemble casts (*NYPD Blue*) or as the stars of their own shows (*The Closer*, 2005–11; and *Saving Grace*, 2007–10).

The 1990s

The innovations in storytelling, style, and gender politics that emerged in TV cop shows of the 1980s were further extended and complicated in the 1990s. Steven Bochco, cocreator of *Hill Street Blues*, teamed with *Hill Street* writer and producer David Milch to create *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005), billed as an “adult” police drama that brought R-rated language, partial nudity, and a renewed sense of gritty urban realism to the genre. Set in Manhattan’s lower east side and filmed in a jittery, handheld style, *NYPD Blue* was most notable for its mature, complex handling of the personal drama of cops’ lives—variously involving office romance, marriage, infidelity, alcoholism, cancer, and racism—and for interweaving these serial elements with gripping procedural plotting.

The long-running *NYPD Blue* was also notable for its valorization of the Angry White Male cop. In part because of its countless cast changes over 12 seasons, the show’s moral core increasingly became the portly, bald, alcoholic, rage-prone Detective Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz), who routinely beat up suspects, spouted racist epithets, and derided “perps” who opted to “lawyer up” rather than confess to their crimes. The show arguably excused Sipowicz’s compulsive police brutality as the righteous fury of a cop who suffered mightily for the job; though he trampled on the civil rights of his suspects, those suspects were usually shown to be guilty, and Sipowicz was further ennobled by a series Job-like personal trials, including alcoholism, prostate cancer, the murders of his older son and second wife, and the tragic deaths of two of his partners.

The impact of the job on the lives of cops was also a central theme in *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99), another ensemble police drama frequently compared to *NYPD Blue* but which eschewed the latter’s soap-opera-like melodrama. Set in inner-city Baltimore and based on former police reporter David Simon’s book *Homicide: Life on the Killing Streets* (1991), a gritty nonfiction exposé that detailed 12 months in the life of a Baltimore homicide unit, *Homicide* was a visually stylized, cerebral, character-driven cop show that focused not so much on acts of murder themselves but on the impact of those murders on the detectives who investigated them.



A scene being filmed for *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* in November 2007. *Law & Order* premiered in September 1990 and completed its 20th and final season in May 2010, making it the longest-running police show in the history of television. It also tied with *Gunsmoke* for the longest-running prime-time drama series of all time.

Unlike the flawed-but-valorous cops of *NYPD Blue*, *Homicide's* detectives were eccentric and chatty, and the show, under the guidance of executive producer Barry Levinson, used cinematic innovations of the French New Wave, including jump cuts, roving handheld camera work, and philosophical dialogue. This approach was particularly evident in the show's acclaimed first-season episode "Three Men and Adena," in which erudite African American detective Frank Pembleton (Andre Braugher) and his white rookie partner Tim Bayliss (Kyle Secor) spend the entire episode trying unsuccessfully to wring a confession out of a suspected child murderer. Perhaps the signature image of the series was the homicide squad's "murder board," a white chart that tracked the progress of the detectives' cases in red marker (for unsolved) and black marker (for solved); the board seemed to symbolize both the fleeting victories and perpetually unfinished nature of urban police work.

As the police drama increasingly became a vehicle for exploring the human costs of both crime and police work, the old-fashioned police procedural reinvented itself as well, as evinced by two crime shows that wrung fresh ideas from technical aspects of the investigative process. *Law & Order* (1990–2010), the longest-running cop show in the history of television, combined the police procedural and the courtroom drama, while *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–present) focused on forensic detectives who solved crimes through scientific analysis of physical evidence. That both series became enormously successful "franchises" comprising numerous spin-offs (including *CSI: Miami*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and many more) reaffirmed the durability—and profitability—of "stand-alone" episodes in which cops crack cases in under an hour.

Episodes of *Law & Order* were split into two halves: the first tracked the police investigation of

a crime, and the second followed the district attorneys' prosecution of that crime. Backgrounding the characters' private lives in favor of ripped-from-the-headlines cases, *Law & Order* nonetheless managed to provide an unusually nuanced view of the antagonistic and symbiotic relationship between cops and district attorneys. While many cop shows portrayed the legal system as inert and attorneys as ethically suspect, *Law & Order* dramatized the intricate chess game that police and lawyers must play in order to convict criminals within the constraints of the legal system. The show's ever-changing cast also suggested the diversification of the cop show genre as a whole: In the series' early days, the cops and lawyers were mostly white and male; in later seasons, African Americans and women took over key roles.

CSI, by contrast, took the police series in a more scientific direction, focusing on forensic "criminalists" who work the night shift at a high-tech crime lab in the Las Vegas Police Department. Instead of familiar cop-show staples such as interrogations, shoot-outs, and car chases, *CSI* immersed viewers in the minutiae of shoe etchings, anal swabs, torn hair follicles, bullet wounds, voice analysis, DNA evidence, and other state-of-the-art techniques that enabled the police to re-create crimes in hypothetical, often gory, flashbacks. While *CSI*'s appeal stemmed in part from its flashy visual style and emphasis on blood and guts, the show's scientific bent also offered viewers a reassuring vision of police work as an exact science in which catching a criminal was often a matter of analyzing evidence correctly. As the unit's brilliant leader, Gil Grissom (William Petersen), admonished his team: "People lie. The evidence doesn't lie." This seductive premise generated what some called the "CSI effect," in which real-life families of crime victims expected swifter resolutions to murder investigations and juries required more direct, less circumstantial evidence to convict defendants.

Perhaps the most durable, though least acclaimed, police procedural of this era was *COPS* (1989–present), a so-called "reality" show that used handheld video cameras to track real-life patrol officers on the job. Familiar to American TV audiences for its "Bad Boys" theme song and lowbrow sensibility, *COPS* offered an endless parade of traffic stops, domestic disturbances, and

drug arrests in low-income neighborhoods while providing little if any context or social analysis—just the vicarious thrill of watching police apprehend "criminals."

The 2000s

While procedurals such as *COPS*, *CSI*, and *Law & Order* continued to thrive on traditional network television well into the 21st century, two cop shows that appeared on cable in the new century's first decade—*The Shield* (FX, 2002–08) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–08)—took the police drama into deeper and darker territory than it had ever been before by offering sociologically grim, dramatically layered examinations of crime and corruption in the urban ghetto. Shot in a grainy, handheld style in some of Los Angeles's grimmest locations, *The Shield* centered on an experimental LAPD "Strike Team" that used illegal methods to combat gangs, drug dealers, and murderers while essentially operating as a gang unto itself. The Strike Team's leader, Vic Mackey, played by the bald, charismatic Michael Chiklis, was the apotheosis of the cop as antihero, far exceeding *NYPD Blue*'s comparatively tame Andy Sipowicz. Dubbed by one TV critic as "Tony Soprano with a badge," Mackey brutalized suspects, planted evidence, stole drugs and money, and, in a shocking act whose consequences rippled throughout the show's seven seasons, shot and killed a member of his own unit.

Like the film *Training Day* (2001), *The Shield* was inspired by the LAPD's Rampart corruption scandal of the late 1990s, and the series arguably glorified, even as it critiqued, the figure of the outlaw cop. That Mackey was a doting father of three ensured audience sympathy, even as his violent acts made him repugnant. By presenting Mackey as an extremely effective but extremely immoral cop, *The Shield* posited corruption as a distasteful but potentially necessary tool for effective crime-fighting. Moreover, *The Shield* showed that Mackey was far from alone in his manipulations; indeed, the series took a pitilessly Hobbesian view of the police as an institution irretrievably shaded by the self-interest of its personnel at all levels.

The Wire's take on the police drama was less sensationalistic but no less unsettling. Created by David Simon and drawn, like *Homicide*, from

his years of crime reporting in Baltimore, *The Wire* was equal parts cop show and sociological exposé, examining not just police work but the painful decline of the American inner city. In its first season, the show focused on a single police drug investigation in the blighted housing projects of West Baltimore (the show's title came from the wiretapping technology used to monitor drug dealers) but distinguished itself from cop-show norms by exploring the lives of the dealers and addicts as fully as it did of the police officers. In subsequent seasons, the show's scope expanded to examine labor unions, city politics, public education, and the news media, implicitly arguing that the institution of law enforcement and the war on drugs could not be understood without accounting for the systemic rot in all of these institutions, as well as the human cost facing individuals who live and work within them.

In articulating these critiques, *The Wire* rejected the tidy closure of the police procedural as well as the often ahistorical, decontextualized picture of crime offered in even the most sophisticated police dramas. Moreover, in a genre often prone to glorifying white male heroes (and anti-heroes), *The Wire* was notable for featuring perhaps the richest and most varied cast of African American actors in the history of television; its maverick white cop, Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), was often relegated to the periphery. Perhaps the central theme of *The Wire*'s depiction of law enforcement was the way in which political opportunism and limited resources hamper cops' ability to conduct meaningful long-term investigations; the show revealed how cops are pressured to fudge crime statistics and engage in aggressive street-level arrests that look good in the eyes of the public but actually enable the drug trade to continue unabated and, worse, tend to alienate minority communities. *The Wire*'s bleak position on the drug war was perhaps best expressed by one officer's remark that the "war" on drugs is a misnomer, because "wars end."

Even as *The Wire* characterized police work as an exhausting war of attrition, the television cop show itself appeared to be anything but exhausting in the early 21st century; indeed, police officers on TV continued to become at once more outlandish and more familiar with each new show. The pay-cable series *Dexter* (2006–present), for

example, took the cop-as-antihero concept to a new extreme by focusing on a Miami police "blood-spatter" expert who is secretly a serial killer of serial killers, while *Southland* (2009–present) used cinema-verité techniques to follow flawed patrol officers and detectives through the same sun-bleached LA-noir landscape featured in *Dragnet* and *The Shield*. As these and other cop shows attest, U.S. audiences remain fascinated by the men and women who wear badges, carry guns, and make television their beat.

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See Also: Film, Crime in; Film, Police in; Literature and Theater, Police in; Television, Crime in.

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