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‘The border is calling’: cross-border crime, police militarisation and benevolent policing in the visual-discursive framing of border police recruitment adverts

Abstract

Scholars from Border Criminology have focused increasingly not just on how the systems that police global (im)mobility are constructed but also *who* is tasked with policing the border. There has, similarly, been some academic focus on the significance of police recruitment adverts in projecting discourses about policing both to potential recruits and in the broader strategic (re)imagining of the police role through the dual framing of both community orientated objectives and more militarised forms of policing. However, this has not been expanded to materials and campaigns aimed at recruiting border policing personnel. This paper addresses this gap by analysing recruitment materials for border policing roles in the UK, USA, EU and Canada. Drawing on visual criminology and multi-modal discourse analysis, I argue that recruitment adverts frame border police agents as heroic crime-fighters and guardians of the nation, while appealing to a more benevolent form of border policing as a humanitarian practice of saving vulnerable migrants and facilitating legitimate travel. Border policing is presented as law enforcement career that enacts nationalistic sentiments of protection and pride. Extending the ‘thin blue line’ metaphor, border policing is represented as protecting the ‘first blue line’ - where policing the border is literally and symbolically presented as a battleground between the nation and the ‘other’ through visual representations emphasise militarisation and crime-fighting activities such as patrolling borderlands, searching at ports of entry and making arrests.

Introduction

Borders have emerged not just as symbolic markers of state sovereignty but as a mass mediated spectacle for public entertainment (Walsh, 2015; Hughes, 2010). Media spectacles can serve state border control agendas by (re)imaging border policing as a heroic endeavour, protecting the public from external threats and dangerous outsiders. This connects with the emergence of visual criminology in understanding the political significance of visual representations of crime and justice (Carrabine, 2012; Rafter, 2014; Brown, 2014; McClanahan, 2021). There has been some interest within border criminology on how nation states and border policing agents themselves use the media, and the visual field in particular, to communicate with the public (Franko, 2021; Wilson, 2025). Here, border policing agents can cultivate an image as ‘crime-fighters' and protectors of the public and 'exploited' migrants alike through, inter alia, trophy shots of seized goods or mugshots of arrested 'crimmigrants' such as people smugglers (Wilson, 2025).

Previous research has explored (social) media in state communications with the public audiences about migration and border policing (Massari, 2024; Brekke and Thorbjornsrud, 2020; Franko, 2021; Wilson, 2025; Walsh, 2020). What this elides, however, is how border policing agencies and the state seek to communicate with potential recruits. While police recruitment materials have gained some – albeit limited – scholarly attention (Simpson, 2023; Koslicki, 2021, 2022; Nairn and Roebuck, 2022; Wojslawowicz et al., 2024), this has seldom been extended to policing (inter)national borders, despite the bourgeoning literature within border criminology and border policing (Franko, 2020, 2021; Aliverti et al., 2025; Aliverti, 2020; Franko and Gundhus, 2015). I address this gap by considering how discourses about border policing are formed and sustained through recruitment materials. I argue that through highly stylised (social) media recruitment campaigns, border policing is (re)imaged as a thrilling, high adrenaline and crime-fighting career oriented in service of 'the nation' and public protection.

To begin, I situate border policing within the literature on border criminology and crimmigration. I then outline the importance of the visual field in communicating discourses about the border, policing and the 'crimmigrant other'. I discuss the methods used to conduct this research by drawing on visual criminology and multi-modal discourse analysis of recruitment adverts in the United Kingdom, United States, European Union and Canada. I analyse how border policing authorities communicate with potential recruits and how work of border control discursively and visually (re)imagined. Drawing from the metaphor that police represent a 'thin blue line' between civilisation and barbism (Wall, 2020; Linnemann, 2022). I then explore the visual-discursive representation of border police as crime fighters through discourses that emphasise cross-border crime alongside visual representations that emphasise crime-fighting activities and police militarisation. As a both a spatial manifestation and broader discursive resource, border police recruitment adverts depict border policing as the *first* blue line – protecting the physical borderlands but also a 'way of life' in a war against external threats. Finally, I consider how border policing is (re)imagined in benevolent terms, in service of protecting not just 'the public' and 'legitimate' travellers, but also migrants themselves from harm.

Policing the Border: Crimmigration, Citizenship and Illegalised Mobility

Criminological scholarship focused increasingly on borders, citizenship and (illegalised) mobility (see, inter alia, Bosworth, Franko and Pickering, 2018; Franko, 2020; Barker, 2013), and the merging of immigration and criminal law enforcement (Stumpf, 2006). Nation states have increasingly moved to criminalise migration through the mobilisation of a broader penal apparatus that fuses local, domestic and international systems of crime control (Aas, 2013, 2014; Franko, 2020; Bowling and Western, 2018). Here, 'the tools and methods of criminal justice' are used 'to manage, regulate, and ultimately punish unwanted migration' (Barker, 2018: 6). This can seen through immigration related criminal offences (Aliverti, 2013), the expansion of immigration detention (Bosworth, 2014, 2017) and the use of deportation as an adjunct criminal sentence (Barker, 2013; Brouwer, 2020; Aas, 2014).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, criminological interest immigration enforcement and border policing has grown significantly over the two past decades (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Loftus, 2015; Bowling and Westerna, 2018; Brouwer and Van Der Woude, 2018, 2018b). Here, the state relies on representing border policing as public protection to expand punitive border controls (Franko, 2020; Wilson, 2025). This can be seen in the growth in resources allocated to border policing, across the global north, in recent decades. For example, the US border patrol was established in 1924 to enforce US immigration restrictions by 'by preventing unauthorized border crossings and policing borderland regions to detect and deter persons defined as unauthorized migrants' (Herandez, 2011, p.2). In subsequent decades, the number of US border patrol agents has grown from around 4,000 in 1992, 10,000 in 2001 to over 20,000 in 2018 (Vitale, 2018). In the EU, Frontex was established in 2004 as the agency responsible for managing the external EU border (Kalkman, 2021). Since then, the size and shape of the agency has grown significantly and has 10,000 officers in the standing corps. In Canada, the Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) was established in 2003 as part of a move towards securitisation, which has seen border security related expenditure rise (Moens and Gabaler, 2013). Finally, in the UK, a bespoke system of 'crimmigration control' has emerged since the 1970s that places greater emphasis on immigration law enforcement (Bowling and Westerna, 2018).

Border policing captures within it a range of activities aimed at enforcing immigration and customs related laws, and deterring 'unwanted' migration (Franko, 2020). This can range from performing checks at ports of entry, maritime activities and search and rescue operations, border patrols at land borders, and performing inland immigration enforcement activities –

such as ‘immigration raids’ (Bhatia and Burnett, 2022; Vega, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Bowling and Westerna, 2018). At the centre of these discourses is the discursive construction of external threat and the emergence of the ‘criminal migrant’, or ‘crimmigrant other’, who provides a unifying logic for punitive border control and border policing (Franko, 2020; Heber, 2023; Griffiths, 2017). The ‘crimmigrant other’, then, is a global folk devil that brings together global and local policing in service of immigration control (Bowling and Westerna, 2018) where migrants function ‘as dangerous and potentially criminal outsiders’ who threaten national communities (Wilson, 2025: 4).

There is, simultaneously, a more benevolent side to border policing that is often shrouded in the language of safeguarding, vulnerability and humanitarianism whereby border police work to protect vulnerable migrants from exploitation by, inter alia, people smugglers and ‘criminal gangs’ who facilitate illegalised mobility (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, 2022; Wilson, 2025). This can be seen in discourses about migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea in the EU (Soliman, 2023; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022) or small boat crossings and people smuggling in the UK (Wilson, 2025). In the US, this can be seen in the mobilisation of humanitarian aid to migrants attempting the dangerous journey across the US-Mexico border (Gomez, Newell and Vannini, 2020; Vega, 2017), but also in mobilisation of humanitarian narratives by the state itself to deter ‘unwanted’ migration.

The humanitarian framing of border policing, however, does not challenge or resist the expansion of punitive border control. Rather, it is co-opted into the punitive logics and systems of unequal mobility that expand, rather than contract, the border (Wilson, 2025; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). Humanitarianism provides a moral impetus to border policing by fighting the ‘crimmigrant other’. For example, in debates about people smuggling, the state can deploy ‘crime fighting narratives’ to position border policing as a heroic battle against the ‘evil’ smuggler (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). This underlines the political utility of ‘crime-fighter’ narratives central to similar expansions of police and state power through cultural and symbolic representations of police work – or ‘copaganda’ (Linnemann, 2017; Petersen, 2024; Woodand McGovern, 2020) - and the importance of the visual-discursive arena. In the next section, then, I outline the importance of the visual field, and visual criminology, as arenas for border policing and police recruitment more generally.

Visual Criminology, Police Recruitment Adverts and Border Policing

In the era of ‘securitatinment’, the border becomes a mass-mediated spectacle for public entertainment (Walsh, 2015; Hughes, 2010; Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes, 2015).The contemporary media landscape, and social media landscapes in particular, provide myriad opportunities for the state to broadcast migration and border related messages and reach a broader audience including the public and would-be migrants. For example, the Norwegian government crafted bespoke social media campaigns in an attempt to deter asylum seekers from traveling to Norway (Brekke and Thorbjornsrud, 2020). In both EU and Canadian migration institutions, social media communications – particularly visual communications – (re)affirms the key messages of migration governance organisations while working to conceal the complexities and realities of contemporary border work (Massari, 2024).

The spectacle of the border, then, connects with the emergence of visual criminology (Carrabine, 2012; McClanahan, 2021) that gives attention to 'the relation of representations and images of crime and control to power' (Brown and Carrabine, 2017: 1). Visual criminologists do not view the visual field or visual artefacts in descriptive or documentary terms. Rather, the visual field is a generative and relational space through which meaning is constructed and circulated (Petersen, 2024). Visual criminology disseminates the visual significance of, inter alia, the prison and incarceration (Brown, 2014), police mugshots and images of seized assets (Revier, 2020; Linnemann, 2017) or 'copaganda' (Petersen, 2024) Similarly, critical border studies has also had an 'aesthetic turn', particularly in relation to the importance of digital media communications of the border (Moze and Spiegel, 2022; Krstic, 2024; Massari, 2024; Lenette and Misokovic, 2016).

There has, more recently, been some scholarly work that extends visual criminology to the border and the 'image work' (Mawby, 2013) of border policing authorities. Franko (2021), for example, explores the visual communication strategy of Frontex – the EU border and coast guard agency – where there is a focus on 'police-like' communications that emphasise strength, domination and hunting prowess through, inter alia, 'trophy shots' of seized assets or illicit goods. Wilson (2025) introduces the concept of 'crimmigrant visuality' to capture the 'the constellation of visual and discursive representations that make the 'crimmigrant' offender *visible* in political discourse' (p.2). Crimmigrant visuality, then, might comprise of mugshots of captured migrants, images of seized assets or body worn footage from immigration enforcement operations which 'construct carceral subjects that, in turn, (re)imagine border policing as a fight against the crimmigrant other' in state-sanctioned representations of the border on social media (p.6).

While previous research has examined how border policing agencies communicate about the 'effectiveness' of their work to the public (Wilson, 2025; Franko, 2021), this does not examine how these agents seek to communicate with potential recruits. There is, however, scholarship that explores the content, and the broader significance, of police recruitment adverts (Koslicki, 2021; Simpson, 2023; Cairn and Roebuck, 2022; Wojslawowicz et al., 2024). Koslicki (2021), for example, explored how competing discourses of militarisation and community policing are contained within police recruitment adverts - noting that there was a higher percentage of content within recruitment adverts focused on community-orientated themes. Little attention has been paid, however, to the symbolic and political significance of recruitment adverts and online communications aimed at potential border policing agents.

I address this gap by considering online recruitment materials for border policing positions internationally – focusing on the UK, U.S, Canada and the EU. This is significant given the growth in criminological scholarship aimed at understanding the perspectives and motivations for those tasked with border control (Aliverti, 2020; Aliverti and Tawfic, 2025; Franko and Gundhus, 2025; Aliverti et al., 2025). Bosworth and Haas (2025: 1) note, in the context of staff working in short-term holding facilities, 'understanding their experiences, motivations, actions and views, which together constitute 'staff culture', in other words, not only helps us better grasp how border control operates in practice but illuminates the tangled and sometimes contradictory justifications which keep it in place'. I explore how border police recruitment adverts take up the 'thin blue line' metaphor that presents policing as civilising war against beasts and savages (Wall, 2019; Linnemann, 2022, 2017). Border policing is presented as the *first* blue line – the physical and symbolic boundaries of the nation. Contained within this framing, I argue, is a dual-representation of border policing as a 'war' against the criminal other, but also a more benevolent task of welcoming 'legitimate' migrants and protecting vulnerable outsiders. While analysing visual materials and recruitment campaigns cannot speak to the individual subjectivities of those tasked with carrying out contemporary border control, it can shed light on how the state itself seeks to (re)imagine border policing. We can observe, then, how states communicate with potential recruits and connect with their motivations. In sum, recruitment materials illustrate the justifications produced by the state to keep border control 'in place' (Bosworth and Haas, 2025).

Methods

This paper presents an analysis of recruitment campaigns for border policing agencies in the UK, US, EU, and Canada. The aim, here, was not a systematic comparative analysis, nor to generate a large-scale 'generalisable' sample for quantitative analysis. Rather, my aim was to explore discursive formations present in the messages developed by border policing agencies to appeal to potential recruits. In alignment with visual, cultural and popular criminologists, I view the materials analysed here as important cultural texts in themselves, as opposed to measuring their specific effect upon their audience (Rafter and Brown, 2011; Hayward and Young, 2004; Bibeck, 2024). I explore how different nation states communicate with those interested in a career in border policing and law enforcement, the types of activities associated with border policing and how officers were represented in audio-visual footage. Data was gathered using purposive sampling whereby recruitment materials were gathered by searching the official website and YouTube channel of relevant border policing and migration governance organisations. The focus was on audio-visual materials but also includes some text and image-based recruitment campaigns. Materials were included if they were identifiable as part of a recruitment campaign. In practice, this was easy to achieve – indeed the UK Home Office has a dedicated careers channel on YouTube, whereas Frontex, the CBSA and CBP each have 'playlists' containing their historic recruitment campaigns. Additionally, I also conducted a manual search through the post history of the CBP, UK Home Office, Frontex and CBSA YouTube channels. Materials were categorised as 'recruitment' if they were located in recruitment-related playlists, contained recruitment-related messaging or provided links to further recruitment information.

In total, 118 materials were included for analysis from between 2015 and 2025, for two reasons. First, this period is appropriate given the (re)emergence of 'migrant threat' and 'migration crisis' narratives in each (inter)national context examined in this research during this time. Indeed, this can be seen in the context of 'migration crisis' narratives in Europe following the migration crisis in 2015 (Franko, 2020; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022), the Brexit campaign and concomitant anti-immigrant politics in the UK (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017), the recent shift towards anti-immigration political rhetoric in Canada (Lithicum, 2024) and the election of Donald Trump in 2015 and 2024 and his focus on 'open borders', criminal migrants and national (in)security (Gambino, 2024; Barak, Mellinger and Lowrey-Kinbery, 2024). In the US, I have chosen to focus on the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) over other immigration enforcement agents – namely Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The former has a remit for the border itself – securing ports of entry and patrolling the borderlands, whereas the latter is dedicated primary to inland immigration enforcement operations (Hernandez, 2010). I focus, here, on CBP given the jurisdictional similarities between it and Frontex, CBSA and – to a lesser extent – UK Home Office immigration enforcement operations. The second reason relates to the availability of data and identifiable recruitment campaigns online. I focus upon recruitment materials that are available easily as part of the public domain – as opposed to archival research aimed at exploring historic recruitment efforts.

Data was analysed using a multi-modal discourse analysis to extend the discursive field of analysis to incorporate other modes such as images, gestures, sounds, music and tenor (O'Halloran, 2011; Ledin and Machin, 2017). Once materials had been collected, they were thematically analysed and 'read' through viewing each material. I produced a transcript of written passages while also producing a written description of visual content. Following Wilson (2024, 2025), spoken or written discourses were analysed to locate discursive formations and the inter-relationship between power, language and knowledge at the border. I focused, here, on how border policing careers were described in audio-video footage or textual recruitment materials, and how this language connected to broader discourses of policing as either a heroic crime-fighting endeavour or a more benevolent practice. To conduct my analysis, I aimed to locate common discursive framings across the recruitment materials analysed. In doing so, texts were read and coded based on the prominence of certain discursive locations, as discussed in the analysis that follows.

Visual analysis was utilised to explore the significance of visual representations in not only showing police power and domination through the visual field (Linnemann, 2017). As McClanahan (2021) reminds us, the police and the visual have always implied one another. Rather, visual analysis here served the additional purpose of documenting avenues through which the state communicates with potential border police recruits by constructing heroic visuals of crime-fighting objectives (such as arrests, search and seizures and patrolling) and militarised police aesthetics, but also more welcoming visual regimes of smiling, welcoming officers that construct more benevolent images of border policing. In conducting visual analysis, I analysed both the semiotic and visual significance of the image as a discursive location in itself, but also the extent to which similar visual-discursive framings were located across different recruitment materials. Here, for example, some commonalities were immediately apparent such as the prominence of uniforms or, to a lesser extent, the presence of firearms or more militarised aesthetics.

The First Blue Line: Border Policing, Uniforms and Taking Pride in Protection

To begin, recruitment adverts typically reproduced a discursive positioning border police officers as guardians or protectors of the nation who take pride in their work. This can be seen through the visual and symbolic importance of wearing a uniform. In the UK Home Office's recruitment material, officers emphasise their pride in wearing 'the uniform', carrying out their work of 'keeping our nation safe':

> 'You feel very proud when you wear this uniform and it makes you become a better person by wearing this uniform. I know I'm doing my part for the country and being able to help people and help the community and obviously help my fellow officers in the field. I'm just really proud that we're keeping our nation safe'. (Border Force - Home Office Careers, n.d)
>
> 'The first time I put it on, I was really excited. I've never worn a uniform before, so for me, it was a feeling of being part of something'. (UK Home Office Careers, 2025)
>
> 'People think we kick down doors and take everyone away. We do make arrests. That's part of our job. But there's a lot more to it. I help people understand their rights and their options. I establish their circumstances and because my uniform can be intimidating I work hard to build trust. My approach is to treat people with respect. (UK Home Office Careers, 2023)

The above quotes juxtapose the visual significance of 'the uniform'. In the former two, it is presented as a symbolic marker of belonging, in the latter as something that intimidates those subjected to immigration enforcement. This is echoed in the visual footage, through which officers are always depicted wearing their uniform. This connects, then, with visual criminology by focusing the 'dynamic qualities of the visual' (Revier, 2020: 316) and symbolic significance of police uniforms (Rowe et al., 2022; Sargeant and Simpson, 2023). Here, 'the visual representation bound up in police uniforms, epaulettes, caps and badges played an important role in the self-legitimation of police officers as they interpreted and defined their occupational identity' (Rowe et al., 2022: 234). Moreover, police uniforms are also important in shaping public perceptions of policing where militarised police uniforms can have a negative impact on public perceptions (Blaskovits et al., 2021). Both of these themes are reflected here - uniforms are presented as a source of pride for the officer, but something that might also be read as intimidating. More generally, (border) police uniforms present an important visual-discursive resource for underlying the importance of border policing and appealing to potential recruits.

Similarly, videos from Frontex and Canada's CBSA contained similar themes about taking pride in protecting (supra)national communities, which is often presented alongside other 'crime fighting' objectives:

> I'm thrilled to be part of the first uniformed service of the EU. I wanted to combat cross-border crime and I believed that Frontex was the ideal platform to accomplish this goal. [...] I believe that the standing corps is a great help for every EU citizen. We help EU

> countries fight border control and fighting crime. Being the first ones, it means a lot. We were the chosen ones. I am very proud because I believe we are a great team.
>
> One of the most amazing things about CBSA is that there are so many different things that you can do. No two days are alike. You can choose to go into a managerial stream. You can go into intelligence investigations, inland enforcement. There's so many different things you can do within the Agency. Ultimately working for the CBSA. I really am proud of the fact that we keep drugs off the street, but I'm also proud of the fact that we are a family here and that we take care of each other. (Canada Border Services Agency, 2022).

Notably, the Frontex advert explicitly articulates the symbolic importance of being the first uniformed EU agency, which is articulated along crime-fighting objectives. In US CBP adverts, similar themes of pride and protection were evident. However, there were also notably more nationalistic sentiments where border policing is associated with familiar rhetorical gestures to freedom and American exceptionalism that have become commonplace in US political discourse:

> You have to have pride in everything you do, because you are a symbol in our continuous fight for freedom. For a safer community [...] We do believe we're protecting more than a line on a map. It's our way of life we're protecting'. (US Customs and Border Protection, 2019).
>
> 'I'm very proud to be a CBPO. We get to be the front line of whoever's coming in, whatever's coming in [...] For us to come to work everyday and, you know, get tasked with defending our country, which I believe is the greatest country in the world, it's the land of opportunity, it's been great for me and my family (US Customs and Border Protection, 2025).

In all the videos above, footage displayed alongside the text typically is highly stylised, combining panoramic footage of border crossings, search operations, officers searching containers, K9 units and portrait footage of CBP officers staring into the camera. Officers are presented on screen in their uniforms and emphasise the pride they feel in carrying out their duties. In this sense, officers are seen to take pride in protection, insofar as border policing is represented as a career that cultivates a strong sense of mission – to protect the 'nation' from external threats such as illegal goods or, indeed, 'illegal' migrants. There is, here, a significance placed on the border as both a physical line, the 'front line' of national protection and defending a 'way of life'. This reflects the common refrain that the heroic, crime-fighting activities of the police stand as a thin blue line between order and chaos (Wall, 2020). The 'thin blue line' is therefore concerned with the production, and distinction, between civilisation and savagery, the borders of which become the foundational – and existential – task of the police (Linnemann, 2022). As Wall (2020, p.328) notes, the heart of the thin blue line mythology concerns the creation of 'civil society through anxiety about the always-uneasy threshold between human and animal, as the modern state becomes fixated on creating, and policing, the lines dividing civilisation/savagery'. This is significant given the bridge between policing in the cinematic and spectacular realm to the narrative technologies of (self)legitimation that underpin contemporary police work. Here, 'the political theology of the thin blue line extends beyond cinematic representations to the theatrics of actual police who see themselves as holy warriors locked in a spiritual battle for civilization's salvation' (Linnemann, 2017, p.365). While the actual impact of the materials analysed here upon their intended audience is out with the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless significant that the visual and discursive strategies developed to appeal to potential recruits and border agents – as well as the public more generally – appears to not only reproduce but extend the discursive framing of (border) policing as 'thin blue line' between order and chaos.

At the border, the metaphorical line that through which the violence of policing is (re)imagined as a civilising process, a dividing line between chaos and order, gains a spatial approximation – the border itself. The border is presented as the *literal* line between order and chaos, insider and outsider; the 'nation' and the crimmigrant other. The point, here, is not semantic. Rather, it is central to the nature of border policing and immigration enforcement - patrolling (literally and figuratively) the borders of membership itself. As crimmigration and border criminology scholars point out, the apparatus of immigration enforcement delineates the boundaries of membership and belonging in an era of mass mobility (Stumpf, 2006; Franko, 2020; Barker, 2012; Bowling and Westerna, 2018). The construction of border policing as a 'thin blue line' goes beyond the border as the physical demarcation of territorial boundaries. Here, the discursive framing explicitly emphasises the symbolic importance of the border. The border is presented as 'more than just a line on a map'. Rather, it is the physical and symbolic border of the nation itself and a 'way of life'. This reflects the colonialist storytelling present in the 'thin blue line' policing imaginaries by separating 'the nation', 'the family' or 'the community' from imagined outsiders and external threats. Indeed, Linnemann (2022) shows the emergence of the 'thin green line' framing of the US Border Patrol. Linnemann draws from an episode of *The Green Line* podcast – a monthly podcast by the National Border Patrol Council and hosted by 'active border patrol agents' that opened with an excerpt from *HBO's game of thrones night watch* – the guards of a massive wall of ice separating them from a massive zombie army. The analogy here relevels a clear view of how the NBPC view themselves, namely as protectors of the nation, comprising a thin blue line that holds back 'an invading horde of uncivilised, subhuman and, importantly, racialized enemies'

In sum, border police recruitment adverts emphasise pride in protecting the nation, and which is legitimated through symbolic importance of the uniform and the job itself. In addition, recruitment adverts also focus on the symbolic importance of the border itself. The border is explicitly articulated as 'more than a line on a map' or the physical demarcation of territory. Correspondingly, it's protection becomes about defending a 'way of life' from external threat. In other words, whereas territorial police might leverage the self-representation as the thin blue line between order and chaos, border policing is therefore positioned as the *first* blue line. That is, as the first meeting point between 'the nation' and the other. What remains to be seen is *how* discourses that emphasises the 'sense of mission' and 'pride' associated with border policing – and protecting the first blue line - manifests through the activities performed by border police in recruitment adverts.

Border Policing, Cross-Border Crime and the First Blue Line

Border policing agents - in a variety of roles and contexts - are presented as symbolic guardians of the community and, as such, provides a career that can allow one to take great pride in their role. There is, then, a need to examine *how* border policing roles are represented and *what* kinds of activities officers are seen to participate in. This can be seen across different international contexts where recruitment materials that often feature officers who stress the varied and unpredictable nature of their work:

> You never know what you're going to get on any given day. You could be on a ship looking for drugs, could pop a container and there's people hiding in there' (US Customs and Border Protection, 2025).
>
> I'm part of a flexible team deployed to work on different priorities. One day I might be patrolling an airfield as part of an anti-smuggling operation, the next I could be seizing large sums of laundered money at a seaport. I love the challenge of not knowing what each day will bring. (UK Home Office Careers, 2023)

In Canada, similar themes can be seen through the CBSA's 'The Border Is Calling' recruitment campaign. The video opens with dramatic panoramic footage of natural landscapes, interspersed with dramatized searches of shipping containers. The video then shows footage of CBSA officers working at airports, checking travellers' documentation and carrying out searches of vehicles while the audio emphasises similar 'crime-fighter' discourses noted above:

> We are the first people you meet, the face of Canada, welcoming travellers, newcomers and returning Canadians. We are Canada's frontline, working on every coast, protecting Canadians and supporting our economy. We work at land borders, airports, marine terminals, rail ports and postal facilities. We contribute to the fight against crime by keeping guns, drugs and other illegal goods out of our communities. We help prevent terrorism, illegal immigration, and wildlife trade. We help protect against human, animal and plant diseases. We enforce laws in support of trade and commerce and collect duties and taxes. We are Border Services Officers. (Canada Border Services Agency, 2022).

This visual medium is important here in visualising these crime-fighting objectives. Indeed, there are familiar nods to the visual economies of police power through 'trophy shots' of seized assets such as drugs and firearms to communicate the effectiveness and crime-fighting heroism of border policing agents (Linnemann, 2017; Wilson, 2025). The visual prominence of cross-border crime, and indeed the border itself, appears to reveal a shift in focus from communications aimed at the general public. Massari's (2024), study of EU and Canadian migration agencies, notes that while protection 'holds significant prominence in the textual narrative surrounding migration' it is 'nearly invisible in the visual representation' (p.15). In recruitment adverts, in contrast, the visual field lends itself to discursive formations that emphasize protection through visual representations of 'crime fighting' activities at the border. In the UK, this is perhaps most explicit. Here, border policing is – at least in part – discursively coupled to the 'crimmigrant other' and arresting migrant criminals. In the UK, the 'my work matters campaign' features 'Elyse' – an immigration officer – where she describes her work as:

> I'm removing foreign convicted criminals. I arrest foreign nationals who've committed crimes in the UK. Sometimes they're violent people who've done horrible things. But we receive outstanding training to deal with most situations and there are opportunities to specialise and learn new skills as your career develops. For me, knowing I've helped take dangerous people off the streets and made the UK a safer place is really satisfying. (UK Home Officer Career, 2022).

As the audio is playing, we see footage of uniformed immigration officer tackle a man down in a controlled manner – a clear connection to the 'training' offered to staff in fighting the 'crimmigrant other'. We then see handcuffs being applied to a man, and a further demonstration of the combat training offered by showing a man tackling another man to the ground in a similarly controlled fashion. For Frontex, this is told through the 'stories' of officers:

> My job is very important because stolen cars are used for financing organized crime [...] I am also involved in preventing human trafficking and any kind of smuggling, including drugs, tobacco, alcohol and guns, fighting cross-border crime and identifying people in need [...] today, I am very proud to protect EU citizens including my family and friends (Frontex, 2023)

In each of these examples, officers can be seen engaging in 'crime-fighting' activities such as conducting vehicle searches, opening shipping containers or conducting arrests. Such activities, then, are central to how border policing has been constructed by the state through recruitment adverts. Central to the framing of border policing agents as 'crime fighters' is the concomitant discursive framing of associated roles as inherently varied, uncertain and – therefore – exciting. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that policing more generally is frequently articulated in terms of action, excitement and danger to appeal to 'adrenaline-seekers' (Loftus, 2010).

There is, also, a palpable militarisation across the visual representations of recruitment adverts that connects with the literature on police militarisation (see Vitale, 2018; Sturrman, 2020; Maher, 2021). Fitting with mythology of the first blue line, militarisation reflects not only material manifestations (through the use of weaponry and tactics found in military combat) but also the ideological emphasis on aggressive policing, and military culture over civil society and community orientated objectives. In recruitment materials, this can be seen in audio-visual materials that express an ideological commitment to toughness, national protection and being the first blue line between 'the nation' and the crimmigrant other. This is particularly evident in US CBP adverts, which often featured highly stylised visuals of searches, arrests and patrols along the US-Mexico border but also heavily featured firearms – frequently showing officers practicing on shooting ranges, reloading weapons or perched upon a hilltop with sniper rifles. Indeed, in 16 CBP recruitment videos, firearms are explicitly featured in the visual footage.

For example, a 2019 recruitment video 'We Service A Mission Bigger Than Ourselves' contains highly militarised footage of officers conducting border patrols on horseback and quadbike, as well as officers wearing a full camouflage uniform in the desert, firing service weapons past the camera frantically in a staging that conjures images of military conflict:

> Here, you combine your strengths and work together to protect something bigger than yourself. Accomplish the mission and save lives. Day and night, by making the right decisions, in the blink of an eye. This isn't just a job, it's a calling. Because we're protecting more than a line on a map, but a way of life, ours. This is no ordinary job. This is the border. (U.S Customs and Border Protection, 2019)

In CBSA recruitment adverts, there were similar aspects of militarisation. In nine videos, officers are armed or engaged in physical activity that displays either their physical fitness or the levels of training required for becoming a CBSA officer. Indeed, there are numerous visual images of officers completing firearms training at a gun range, firing at targets. This footage is usually framed in relation to crime-fighting objectives. For example, one of the 'people's stories' features a visual-discursive linking of 'crime-fighting' with militarised aesthetics:

> At the end of the day, we all want to get the bad guys and keep the bad stuff out of Canada and off our streets away from our children, so that's really, really important to me. When I was a BSO, I had referred in a foreign national that was coming up to Canada seeking entry, and there was something that just kind of didn't hit me the right way – kind of like my "spidey-sense" was going off, and it turned out that he actually had a lot of images that were illegal. He had been doing some voyeurism down in the states, and that individual is now doing over 30 years' worth of jail time in the US.

Video footage begins with the officer opening her locker at attaching both lethal and non-lethal weapons to her belt. The footage then shows the officer speaking to camera in front of a border checkpoint. Finally, we see the officer walking across a small room, armed with a service weapon in her hands, towards a target containing a dark blue outline of a human against a yellow background. We see the officer practice drawing her weapon and aiming at the target. This shows the importance of the visual-discursive field in (re)framing border policing as crime-fighting and armed law enforcement service through which the border service agent plays a vital role in detecting and catching the 'crimmigrant other' (Franko, 2020; Heber, 2023). Finally, border policing is framed in terms of 'keeping the bad guys out' and, in doing so, protecting children. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that discourses of vulnerability – particularly the vulnerability of young children – can be invoked to provide a caring rationale for expanding punitive border control and border policing (Wilson, 2025).

The focus on guns and firearms speaks to protectionist discourses, naturalising the distinction between border police, national communities and the crimmigrant other. In the content of policing, curated displays of guns naturalise the distinction between police and 'criminal Other' and minimises the harm caused by police weapons (Pauls, Walby and Piché, 2022). In doing so, 'fear of the other is harnessed by institutional narratives, which, in turn, creates a social climate where the increased presence of militarised police carrying dangerous firearms is seen as acceptable and necessary' (p.131). Here, the visuality of police firearms speaks to a militarised aesthetic through which visuals of officers firing at targets in a state of battle readiness invited us to consider the threats of those the state wishes to keep out and the thrilling dangers of the borderlands. In doing so, the fear of the crimmigrant other is leveraged to naturalise a militarised border policing regime.

Crossing the First Blue Line: Benevolent Policing and Humanitarian Borders

While border policing is constructed the first blue line - a heroic, crime-fighting endeavour for national protection there is a more benevolent or humanitarian practice represented through recruitment campaigns. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that territorial police recruitment adverts balance militarised aesthetics with community orientated, or indeed benevolent, forms of policing (Koslicki, 2021, 2022). This can be seen in officer recruitment campaigns through the 'desired qualities' or characteristics associated with the ideal candidate. Alongside the familiar traditionally masculine characteristics in policing such as strength, determination, motivation (see Loftus, 2010), there was also a more benevolent commitment to helping people:

> If you're selfless. If you're always looking to help someone, you're looking to help another officer, you're looking to help a stranger who's lost, or you're trying to help someone who's in need, you're gonna succeed, and you're gonna do well (US Customs and Border Protection, 2025).

There is a palpable benevolence to these activities, framed as helping lost strangers, or those in need. This is, additionally, a subtler articulation 'humanitarian borders' – a practice that fuses the dual, often competing logics, of care and control at the border (Aliverti et al., 2025; Aliverti, 2020; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Franko and Gundhus, 2015; Vega, 2017).

This humanitarian rationale can be seen more explicitly through other aspects of border policing such as anti-smuggling and anti-modern slavery activities represented through the adverts. This connects with previous research that notes how, more specifically, discourses of migrant vulnerability and 'crimmigrant' smugglers 'incorporate the aesthetic of both penality and humanitarian concern' in state representations of people smuggling (Wilson, 2025: 18). Indeed, a campaign by the Home Office places helping vulnerable people in-between more enforcement focused activities, 'making arrests' and 'removing convicted criminals':

> I'm protecting people from modern slavery. [...] I visit businesses to identify victims of modern slavery. We find people, including children, working for pennies paying off debts to traffickers. They are too scared to ask for help, or they can't see they're being exploited. But I can, I get them support to escape. Seeing people living and working in terrible conditions is tough but helping them feels incredible. I go home knowing I've saved people from modern slavery, there aren't many jobs where you can say that! (UK Home Office Careers 2023).

Through the audio-visual medium, there is a notable gendered construction of border policing. It is notable here that the more caring and benevolent activities are discussed, in the home office recruitment campaign, by a female immigration officer 'Anita', where the discussion of 'making arrests' and enforcement activities is discussed by a male officer. The gendered dichotomies to borderwork presented through recruitment adverts that speaks to their intended audience. Here, more traditionally masculine 'policing' activities are portrayed by men, more benevolent or caring terms are portrayed by women. It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that border policing authorities seek to craft discursive accounts of border policing intended to appeal to both men and women by representing different aspects of border control in implicitly gendered terms. This connects the gendered politics of bordering, whereby discourses of vulnerability and safeguarding can be leveraged to expand punitive border controls. Wilson (2025), for example, argues that gendered discourses of vulnerability to provide a humanitarian rationale for fighting the criminal other. Here, it seems there is somewhat of an inverse of this logic. This is significant, then, in that the humanitarian rationale is notable not just in how the state legitimises the expansion of punitive border control, but also in how the state seeks to communicate with potential recruits. Indeed, this reflects one of the broader tensions of humanitarian borderwork experienced by those tasked with border policing (see Aliverti et al., 2025).

The benevolent logics of border policing can be seen through depictions of border guards or police agents as welcoming and friendly. For example, the CBSA's *People of the CBSA* recruitment campaign, which often featured officers from a migrant background who could juxtapose their own arrival experiences with their daily work and crime-fighting visuals seen on screen. A video posted in October 2020 features an explicit discussion of a female officer's initial arrival in Canada while the audio is set to footage of an aircraft landing on a runway and a smiling male officer in a primary border control booth:

> I immigrated to Canada when I was about 11 years old. I remember it being a frightening experience, and I was there with my mother. I didn't know what to expect I just heard that Canadians were nice. When we arrived, the BSO was just so lovely. I remember he was just so caring and I have this really fond memory of this welcome. (Canada Border Services Agency, 2020)

Canadian recruitment campaigns were unique in projecting messages about welcoming in visitors and migrants. There is a clear duality through which border policing is, at once, a militarised practice of crime-fighting and national protection and a more benevolent and welcoming rationales seen here. This dual framing of border policing is seen more explicitly in other footage:

> We're trained to read between the lines. To welcome people in, and to keep others out. To facilitate commerce and to enforce law. With professionalism, integrity and respect. Every day, every night together we work on the frontline for our country's safety, security and prosperity. Are you ready for life on the front line? (Canada Border Services Agency, 2021).

There is footage of a family arrival at an airport with a CBSA officer putting a coat over a young child attached the former, and footage of a man being handcuffed and escorted through a door in the latter This speaks to a more benevolent form of border policing – as much about welcoming as excluding. While a clear juxtaposition from more militarised visuals, this speaks to the nature of border policing itself - separating desirable migrants from undesirable and acting as gatekeepers of membership and inclusion (Aas, 2013, 2014; Barker, 2013). In separating 'legitimate' travellers from the crimmigrant other, border policing becomes a 'blue space' (Wilson, Clayton and Rowe, 2025) through which the reading of some bodies as *out of place* is presented as a key task of border policing. Recruitment adverts uphold this duality where upholding global systems of uneven mobility is (re)imaged and visualised as welcoming 'good' migrants' and keeping out the 'bad' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). The task of potential border policing agents, then, is to 'read between the lines' and separate one group from the other.

Conclusion

This paper explores the visual-discursive framing of border policing in recruitment adverts in UK, the EU, Canada and the U.S. In doing so, I argue that border policing agents are constructed as symbolic guardians of the nation and being the first blue line. Extending the long-held notion that the police represent a 'thin blue line' between civilisation and chaos, the violence of policing is (re)imagined as a civilising war against beasts (Wall, 2020), border policing, is a spatial approximation, and extension, of this metaphor, as the *first* blue line separating the nation state and myriad external threats. Recruitment adverts, then, are entangled in a 'politics of meaning' (Ferrell, 2013) through which state agencies seek to (re)position border policing as a 'crime-fighting', high-adrenaline and high-stakes career to appeal to potential recruits. Through visual criminology, we can see the importance of the visual field in constructing these discourses. This can be seen, inter alia, through the visual-discursive and symbolic importance placed on border police uniforms. Similarly, audio-visual representations offer a stage to show not only crimmigrant visuality through visual economies of seized assets or arrested suspects (Wilson, 2025), but also the militarisation of border police agents through footage of high-stakes encounters with crimmigrant others and armed officers. In contrast, there is also more benevolent framing of policing at the border, both in protecting vulnerable migrants from crimes like people smuggling, but also in welcoming in 'legitimate' travellers and migrants.

There are, of course, limitations to studying recruitment materials. This study cannot, speak to the on-the-ground realities of border policing – as others have done (Franko and Gunhus, 2015; Brouwer et al., 2017; Aliverti, 2020), nor the political subjectivities of those tasked with border policing, nor the development of 'staff cultures' that keep systems of border control 'in place' (Bosworth and Haas, 2025). Similarly, this study cannot attest to the impact of these communications upon their audience of potential recruits. Nonetheless, it is noticeable that border policing discourses are constructed, in recruitment materials, to appeal to different demographics of potential recruits. Indeed, this can be seen to the gendered messaging apparent in the campaign materials that appeals to both militarized excitement and war imagery, along with more caring and benevolent forms of 'contact' with the 'outside' at the first blue line. Finally, while this paper demonstrates the importance of understanding and engaging with border police recruitment materials as important visual-discursive texts in themselves, the scale of analysis is limited in scope. In the US in particular, I have chosen to focus on the policing of the border itself, as opposed to the broader apparatus of (crim)migration control that operates within the confines of national borders. Indeed, at the time of writing, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been notable in its increased recruitment efforts across digital, broadcast and print media amid a surge in enforcement activities within the US (Baio, 2025. My hope, then, is that future research can build on the work presented here to further explore these contexts.

This paper underlines the important of the visual-discursive field in constructing spectacularised communities of the border and border policing (see Walsh, 2015). This paper contributes to debates about visual criminology by considering the important of the audio-visual field in border police recruitment adverts. In doing so, I contribute to the limited body of scholarship within visual criminology (Franko, 2021; Wilson, 2025), and the 'aesthetic turn' in critical border studies (Moze and Spiegel, 2022). While the focus, here, is on how the state communicates with potential recruits, this study also contributes to the literature of the border spectacles and public entertainment (Walsh, 2015; Hughes, 2010; Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes, 2015). Indeed, the visual media analysed in this research feature highly stylised accounts of border policing that are publicly available on social media channels, suggesting – again – that specialised accounts of border policing operate in service of state border control agendas by (re)imaging border policing as a heroic endeavour, protecting the public from external threats and dangerous outsiders to *both* public and potential recruits alike. I contribute, additionally, to debates about border criminology and humanitarian borders. In the former, I show how the state seeks to keep systems of border control 'in place' (Bosworth and Haas, 2025) by exploring the justifications for border policing that are sold to potential recruits. The visual field provides an outlet for enticing images of arrests, searches and militarised border policing. In the latter, I show how a benevolent side to border control is made visible through policing certain forms of cross-border crime, but also by acting as gatekeepers of membership through welcoming 'legitimate' forms of mobility.

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